

**FINAL WORDS FROM THE CROSS:
“I AM THIRSTY”
John 19:28-29
A Sermon by John Thomason
Woodbury UMC
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If you’ve been a witness to “March Madness” on television, then you’ve witnessed this scene dozens of times. During the NCAA men’s basketball tournament, a coach notices that one of his players looks exhausted from running up and down the court, so he takes him out of the game to give him a rest. The player flops on the team bench. He’s sweating profusely; he’s breathing heavily; his mouth is as dry as dust. He doesn’t have to say, “I’m thirsty.” He doesn’t have to beg to be hydrated. No, a trainer sees the need and takes the initiative; he hands a water bottle to the young player, who immediately begins to quench his thirst.

As Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell the story of the crucifixion, Jesus receives a similar gesture of benevolence. As he hangs from the cross, someone in the crowd takes the initiative to offer him a drink. It’s not sweet, tangy Gatorade; it’s not even cool, clear water; it’s sour wine, no one’s first choice for a refreshing beverage. But at least it’s something wet; at least it’s an acknowledgement that crucifixion is a slow, torturous method of execution, that even a dying criminal deserves a drop or two of comfort and relief. This is how Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell the story.

By contrast, in John’s Gospel, no one in the crowd seems to notice or care that Jesus is literally dying of thirst. So, according to this Evangelist, Jesus takes the initiative by saying, “I am thirsty”(John 19:28). Make no mistake about it: on the most mundane, human level, he’s acknowledging real, raw, ravaging thirst – the putrid taste and pasty feeling in his mouth, the unbearable pressure at the back of his throat.

In Yann Martel’s novel, *Life of Pi*, a sixteen-year old boy finds himself stranded in a lifeboat in the middle of the Pacific Ocean with no one for company but a menacing 450-pound Bengal tiger. The boy Pi talks about what it’s like to be desperately thirsty. He says, “I have heard that the hunger for air exceeds as a compelling sensation the thirst for water. Only for a few minutes, I say. After a few minutes you die, and the discomfort of asphyxiation goes away. Whereas thirst is a drawn-out affair. Look,” he says, “Christ on the Cross died of suffocation, but His only complaint was of thirst.”

When Jesus says, “I am thirsty,” he’s referring in part to the terrible dryness in his mouth and throat. And so, as in the other three Gospels, the bystanders at the cross take a sponge full of sour wine and hold it to Jesus’ mouth – one last taste of pleasure in the midst of his unspeakable pain.

But let’s not forget that this is John’s Gospel, and John often has a different agenda than the other Evangelists. The words and actions of Jesus are frequently symbolic; they have meaning beyond their face value. In John, when Jesus offers his disciples bread, it’s not just a loaf of matzah that he gives them; it’s living bread, spiritual bread, bread that satisfies one’s hunger in both this life and the next. When Jesus offers water to the woman at the well, it’s not just H₂O that he’s giving her – it’s living water, water that quenches the thirst of the soul.

And so, when Jesus says from the cross, “I am thirsty,” his mouth is really parched and he could really use something to drink, but it’s likely that he’s also thirsty for something more than the liquid the bystanders offer him. On a deeper level, his words recall the time of his arrest just a few hours before, when he asks Simon Peter, “Am I not to drink the cup that my Father has given me?” (John 18:11). The “cup,” of course, is his death, which is the fulfillment of his God-given mission. When Jesus says, “I am thirsty,” he’s expressing his willingness to drink this cup, his readiness to embrace his death, his unflinching desire to complete his work on earth in accordance with God’s will.

It’s ironic, isn’t it? “I am thirsty” sounds like the cry of a man who wants to live, or at least wants to be as comfortable as possible until he dies. Countless times as a hospital chaplain and parish pastor, I’ve sat beside the bed of a dying patient, heard those words, “I am thirsty,” and provided a sip of water for comfort. But in John’s Gospel, “I am thirsty” is Jesus’ way of saying, “I’m ready and willing to die – for God’s sake, and for your sake.”

I once read the newspaper account of a 25-year-old Texas woman who was driving with her two children on an interstate highway. The left front tire of her SUV blew out and the vehicle rolled on its side and caught fire. Her leg was trapped under the SUV and she could not save herself from the burning car wreck. But she was able to hand her son and daughter, ages 4 and 8, to bystanders, and both children survived.

I’ve often wondered what I would do if I were called upon to die a purposeful death – a death that involved sacrificing my own life so that others could live, or a death that resulted from taking a firm stand against some intolerable evil. In my dying moments, would I be willing to drink the cup that Jesus drinks? Would I be thirsty as he is thirsty – not just thirsty for anything liquid, but thirsty to do the right thing, the honorable thing; thirsty to fulfill my calling and destiny; thirsty to do God’s will, damn the consequences?

In last Sunday’s sermon, I touched on the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who joined the resistance movement opposing Adolph Hitler and the Nazis during World War II. Bonhoeffer’s conscience led him to participate in the plot to assassinate Hitler. When he was identified as an accomplice, he was imprisoned and eventually executed.

There is a chapter in Bonhoeffer’s story that adds a special poignancy to his death. Prior to the war, he was invited to come to the United States to teach at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He was at the height of his fame as a theologian, and his tenure at Union was marked with distinction. He was asked to stay and become a permanent member of the faculty there. The offer was tempting to Bonhoeffer, because living in America and teaching at Union would have been a safe haven from the dangers of life in Germany. But his conscience would not allow him to take the easy way out and remain in New York. He felt obligated to return to Germany and continue resisting the atrocities of the Nazi regime. That is what he did, and that decision ultimately cost him his life.

Why did Bonhoeffer do it? Not because he had a martyr complex and wanted to die a premature death. No, he did it because he was thirsty – not for safety and security, but for justice and peace, for the well-being of his own people, for the righteousness of God. He did it because he could fulfill his mission in life only if he put himself at the risk of death. He could have had champagne to drink, but he chose sour wine instead. Like Jesus, he drank the cup of suffering.

Bonhoeffer's fame only increased after his untimely death. But there were many others who made similar sacrifices and never made the headlines. One such person was Franz Jagerstatter, a young Austrian farmer whose little-known story was portrayed in a recent movie, *A Hidden Life*. In the 1930's, Franz tended sheep and grew wheat in the foothills of the Alps where, he said, he could live "above the clouds," away from the bustle and danger of urban life. But the faraway danger came to his doorstep when the Nazis annexed Austria and drafted him to serve in the military.

Franz recognized the evil intent of Hitler and his henchmen and refused to participate in their crimes. As the war unfolded, he became a conscientious objector. He was willing to serve the state in a peaceful role like working in a hospital. But there were some things he was not willing to do – like making the Hitler salute, or swearing allegiance to the Fuhrer, or taking up arms against innocent people. Franz understood the likely consequences. He would be taken away from his family – his devoted wife and three young daughters. He would be imprisoned and possibly executed.

Franz agonized about his moral dilemma: was it better to tow the party line so he could live to care for his family, or to obey his conscience and risk losing everything? People in his village told him that it was useless to resist the Nazis, that his solitary act of defiance would make no difference, that the world wouldn't take notice of his bravery. The townspeople began to shun him as a traitor and treat his wife as guilty by association.

There is a scene in the movie that depicts a crucial moment in Franz's decision-making. He assists a local artist who is painting murals on the walls of the village church. The artist comments that he is painting images of Jesus that the people want to see – you know: gentle Jesus, meek and mild, a Savior who is comforting and inoffensive, a God-Man who is glorious and majestic. What the people don't want to see is a Jesus who takes a stand against evil, stirs up controversy, and drinks the cup of suffering. Then the artist tells Franz, "It is better to suffer from injustice than to do it." Those words cement Franz's decision and seal his fate. He refuses to serve in combat for the Nazis; he is arrested and imprisoned; he is put on trial, convicted of treason, and beheaded by a professional executioner.

What would drive a person to accept such a fate when he could have taken the path of least resistance? I'll tell you what drove Franz – it was thirst. Not physical thirst, although he had plenty of that when he was in prison. What drove him was spiritual thirst, a thirst for moral integrity, a thirst for a higher righteousness than conformity to a corrupt state, a thirst for obedience to the will of God. Franz understood that "it is better to suffer from injustice than to do it." And so, like Jesus, he drank the cup of suffering.

Would I? Would I hold up a sign on the village green to protest some injustice and risk the scorn of my neighbors? Would I raise my voice in objection when someone utters an ethnic slur? Would I choose God's will over the will of the masses and face criticism and rejection? Would I? Would you?