

On Palm Sunday we pastors have liberties. We can choose how we will commemorate this most sacred of days. It's fun to reflect on the triumphal entry. Oh, the pageantry. Jesus entering triumphantly...on a donkey? Crowds gathering to wave branches (not palm branches) and laying down coats. People shouting Hosanna! This is the fun way to think about Palm Sunday. This is the easy way to think about Palm Sunday.

Except...we know what happens only days later. The triumphant Jesus will be executed in the most cruel and inhumane way known to man. And the cross has become the most iconic way for us as Christians to memorialize this event. Today we wrap up our series on the five essential practices of the Christian life. So, it seems fitting to tie the last words that Jesus spoke from the cross to the way Jesus even to his dying breath pursued these very practices.

We start by looking at the act of crucifixion. This was a brutal form of execution and for a good reason. It was meant to be a sign to other criminals. The Romans reasoned that such a grotesque and cruel punishment would be a great deterrent. It was a slow and painful way to die. Death could be a 2- or 3-day process.

Jesus was sentenced by Pontius Pilate to be crucified after he was beaten and taunted. He was then forced to carry the patibulum. This is the portion of the cross that his hands would be nailed to. He was led along the Via Dolorosa, the way of suffering. The destination was a rock outcropping outside of Jerusalem. There the soldiers assembled the cross. Jesus was stripped. His wrists were nailed to the cross. His feet were next. It was common for a foot to be nailed to either side of the cross. Then the cross was hoisted into place. This was around 9:00 am.

In most of our pictures of the crucifixion, the cross looks like it is standing at least 10 feet tall. In real life, crosses stood only 2 or 3 feet from the ground.

Shock, loss of blood, asphyxiation due to the buildup of fluid around the heart and lungs. All the ways in which crucifixion would kill its victims. Breathing and talking would become more and

more difficult because to do so meant the victim needed to pull himself up by the nails piercing the wrists. The pain was excruciating. To speak anything from the cross came at a terrible cost.

Jesus felt the need to increase the cost of his already precious gift. Between the four gospels, we have seven final statements from Jesus. Matthew and Mark record the same one. Luke and John each record 3 different statements. Let's take a look at each of these.

Jesus utters three different prayers from the cross. Matthew and Mark record one of them. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This prayer comes directly from Psalm 22:1. It has been referred to as the "cry of dereliction." Luke records the other 2 prayers of Jesus from the cross. "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing". And "Into your hands I commend my spirit."

Is it any surprise that three of Jesus' last seven statements would be prayers to God? We know that Jesus prayed frequently. It was part of his daily rhythm. He prayed in deserted places. He prayed when he had important decisions to make. Luke tells us in 6:12 that once Jesus prayed all night long. He prayed on mountains, he prayed in a boat, he prayed for the sick, and he prayed for his enemies. He prayed the night before his crucifixion. First for his disciples according to John 17. Then he uttered this prayer in Gethsemane. "My Father, if it's possible, take this cup of suffering away from me. However – not what I want but what you want."

On the cross, Jesus demonstrates the second spiritual practice, studying scriptures. Jesus consistently saw the good news of the Kingdom in nature, in stories, and in the experiences of people. He used and lived scripture all throughout his time of ministry. When he was tempted by the devil. When he healed the sick. When he preached. Hundreds of times Jesus in words and deeds cited, pointed to, alluded to, and fulfilled the commands, the hopes, and the messages of the Bible.

Two of the three prayers that Jesus prays from the cross are direct quotes from scripture. He prays Psalm 22:1 which we just heard and Psalm 31:5 "Into your hands I commit my spirit."

What an expression of complete trust in God. The Greek word used here for commit means, “to entrust to someone for safekeeping.” Jesus may not feel God’s presence, but he offers this statement of trust anyway. When we’re scared, when we’re confused, when we’re uncertain, when we’re exhausted, when we’re facing adversity, think of the strength we speak into being by this simple 7-word prayer.

The fact that Jesus is hanging on a cross is abject proof of his commitment to the third essential practice of serving God. But his words take this even deeper.

Look at what he said to his “beloved disciple” John. Jesus sees his mother standing there with the others. This was going to be necessary. This was going to be worth the pain. He pulls himself up by the nails in his wrists. First, he speaks to his mother. “Woman, here is your son.” Then he speaks to John. “Here is your mother.” Even as Jesus is dying, he is thinking about who will take care of his mother. “Honor your father and mother.” Jesus did not forget this.

John was not Mary’s son and yet Jesus is asking John to take care of her as if she were. Is there someone out there that you’ve been asked to be a son or daughter of. Someone not related to you. An elderly neighbor or friend. Consider a visit or a call. Think about how that would brighten their day.

When it comes to generosity and giving, I think we can all agree we come up short in comparison to Jesus. Suffering on the cross, dying for us, it’s the very definition of generosity and self-giving.

One of Jesus’ statements from the cross that John records is, “I thirst”. Pretty mundane really. It’s a common thing when you’re with someone who is dying to give them some ice chips to ease their thirst.

So why did John include this? Why was this mundane statement so important that it earned a spot in John’s recollections of the crucifixion? Remember back to Christmas and our visit to Uncle John’s house? John is the master of creating significant meaning from the mundane.

Earlier in the gospel of John, Jesus has the encounter with the woman at the well. During that encounter Jesus talked about living water or life. Perhaps, as he so often does, John wanted his readers to be drawn to the irony that we now have Jesus pouring himself, his life out for the world. In his thirst, he is giving everything he has.

At last, we come to the final practice of bearing witness. Jesus was passionate about this, and it reaches its climax on the cross. On the cross, his arms outstretched, Jesus is basically saying, “This is how much God loves you. This is the lengths to which God will go to save you.” Can you think of a more powerful way to draw people to God than being lifted up on a cross.

The Greek word for witness is *martus*: one who testifies to what they have seen. It’s also the source of another word. Martyr. Can there be a greater form of witnessing than to die for what you believe to be true?

To look at the cross is to see a picture of the good news of God’s love and grace. And for those who might miss this, Jesus offers this prayer from the cross. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Forgive the Roman soldiers gambling for his clothing. Forgive the soldiers who beat, abused, and humiliated him before nailing him to the cross. Forgive the Jewish leaders who in their jealousy and insecurity accused Jesus of blasphemy. Forgive the crowds who were standing by and hurling insults. Forgiveness for all.

As Jesus prayed for and forgave others, there was one person deeply moved by this. The bandit hanging next to him. The type of violent criminal who would beat a man and leave him for dead. (Uh...life from the Good Samaritan?)

When the other bandit started insulting Jesus, this man stepped in and told him to be quiet. Then he looks at Jesus and utters these words. “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.” This bandit was on the road to change. He didn’t fully understand this Messiah. But if this Messiah could forgive the very people who are killing him, he wanted to be a part of that.”

Jesus did more than remember this bandit. Once again, Jesus grits his teeth and uses his wrists to pull himself up so he can offer these words to the bandit. “Today you will be with me in paradise.”. Even as his life is draining from him, Jesus is still trying to rescue lost sheep.

We come to Jesus’ final words. In Greek it reads one word, tetelestai. In English, we use the three words. “It is finished.” Completed, fulfilled, accomplished. Something we would expect someone like Michelangelo to say when he completed the Sistine Chapel. “At last, it is finished! It is accomplished!

One last time, Jesus pushed himself up by his wrists. This time he shouts Tetelestai! This is not a cry of defeat. It is a cry of victory. Jesus accomplished what he came to do. Gave us his masterpiece. This divine drama. God, through the suffering and death of Jesus, unmasks human depravity and reveals the depth of God’s redeeming love.

It’s the cross that brings it all together. It’s there that we find the practices of worship and prayer, study, serving, giving, and sharing. We hear it in the seven sayings of Jesus on the cross. It is this divine love that creates in us a longing to walk with Jesus and to invite Jesus to walk with us.

Let us pray.

When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died: my richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride.

See from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow, and love flow mingled down. Did e’er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown.

We’re the whole realm of nature mine, that we’re an offering far to small. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my live, my all.