

“One Word”

Psalm 22; Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12; Hebrews 10:16-25; Mark 14:1 – 15:47

Good Friday, April 3, 2015

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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“Seven Last Words.” These utterances of Jesus from the cross were first used as a worship format by a Jesuit priest in Peru in the 18th century. It remains popular today with Protestants in England and North America. In Milford, today and last year, we used it for Noon Community Good Friday worship. These “words” from Jesus are actually phrases that come from a harmonization of the four Gospels:

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

“Today you will be with me in paradise.”

“Woman, here is your son. Son, here is your mother.”

“My God, why have you forsaken me?”

“I thirst.”

“It is finished.”

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

Tonight, we heard the full story of the passion read from a single Gospel, the Gospel of Mark. In his typical clipped, urgent style, Mark recalls only one “word” from Jesus: *“Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?”*, Aramaic for *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”*

One word. One word for us to figure out. It reminds me of the 1991 movie “City Slickers” when Mitch Robbins, played by Bill Crystal, goes west in a mid-life crisis and is toughed up by Curly, the cowboy played by Jack Palance. One exchange goes like this:

Curly: *“Do you know what the secret of life is?”* [holds up one finger]

Mitch: ***“Your finger?”***

Curly: *“One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and the rest don’t matter.”*

Mitch: ***“But, what is the ‘one thing.’”***

Curly: [smiles] *“That’s what you have to find out.”*

One word. It's the one word that matters. One word for us to figure out.

Even in the Gospel of Mark—which is the most earthy, direct and unvarnished of the four Gospels—things are not always what they seem. Jesus utters this one word at the end of his crucifixion, after three hours of asphyxiation and just before his death. Knowing how “human” is the Jesus of Mark’s Gospel, we would not be faulted if we heard this as the gasping lament of a dying man who, despite his intense devotion, felt abandoned by God. Most of us, minus the crucifixion, have been there.

But listen again: *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* Where have we heard those words before? Where had Jesus heard them before? In Mark and in all the Gospels, Jesus knew his scripture and cited it frequently. Of course, there it is: the opening verse of Psalm 22!

Could it be that Jesus, instead of faulting God, is praising God? What if he was trying, although his ebbing strength would not allow him to complete it, to quote the 22nd Psalm? Suppose in his heart he was straining toward verse 25: *“From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who worship the Lord....May your hearts live forever! All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before the Lord.”*

Then surely is death is more than an innocent man victimized by a rigged system and a kangaroo court. In quoting the psalm he yearns for everyone to remember and worship God. What else is this but love? The one word, the word of self-emptying that leads to God-filling, is love. It is love, amplified by 18 centuries in these words of Charles Wesley:

“’Tis Love! ’tis Love! Thou diest for me, I hear thy whisper in my heart. The morning breaks, the shadow flee, pure, Universal Love thou art. To me, to all, thy mercies move; thy nature and thy name is Love. To me, to all, thy mercies move; thy nature and thy name is Love.”