

GOOD FRIDAY
Luth Church of the Master
4-16-76

Tonite - we've read Jesus' death announcement -- what has come to be known as an obituary. Usually, a death announcement causes us little grief, in and of itself. As we scan the evening paper, we usually read the obituaries with a cold detachment. We run down the names with tearless eyes - no grief in our hearts as long as the persons are strangers, unknown.

Sorrow only strikes out at us from the cold page when it reveals that death has come to one of our own. When the name is the name of my -- my mother, my father, my brother, my wife, my husband, my child, my friend -- only then do we find the page tear-stained -- only then do we read the sad lines with heavy hearts.

Likewise, a funeral chapel, a cemetery, a hill with three cross-like trees have no significance of sadness in and of themselves. In our daily round we can pass a funeral chapel five times and feel no pang. Often, we're hardly aware that it exists.

But let the day come when one of our own reposes there in death. From that day on there is a certain painful tug at the heart whenever we pass that place. The graveyard is just green grass and cold stones until ~~THAT~~ THAT FIELD, AMONG THOSE STONES there is one that bears a loved one's name.

So it is - our burden of grief is always proportionate to our store of love for that person while alive. Likewise - the death of Jesus has meaning for you and me to the same degree that his life has had meaning for us -- to the degree that we can call him MY FRIEND.

We see tonite much of the world passing the cross UNHEEDING - breathing no repentant vow. Many today have gone about their regular Friday routine -- Christ hasn't received even a passing nod. Jesus Christ for many today is like reading the obituary of an unknown person.

But not so for us, and a minority of people in the world like us. For we are here - and we are there at Golgatha. For us, Jesus is a personal friend - one whom we have known - one whom we can grieve for at least every Good Friday.

For us, Jesus is like the buddy who was at our side in the hell of war. We remember that moment when the hand grenade was thrown into our group of men -- that hand grenade represented death (we have called it sin).

And then that buddy without any prompting throws himself atop that live grenade -- making his body a living shield. In the burst of wild fire, he dies, and the rest of us live.

He wasn't responsible for the war - yet he innocently takes upon himself the crucifixion of the war. Innocently, he dies, in order that we might live.

As his buddies, how are we to feel about his sacrifice? Granted, there will be some guilt -- largely guilt because of that damnable war - that damnable sin. But MORE THAN GUILT - there will be eternal gratitude.

One thing for certain - we will remember our buddy's sacrifice with tears. And evern more certain, we will never forget him - never forget his innocent death - never forget how he took upon himself the sin of war and died in order that we might live.

My dear freends in Christ - maybe this more contemporary parable of Golgatha helps you and I get closer to our friend Jesus. Yes - we do feel some guilt due to his innocent death -- but even more - we can only feel eternally grateful that his sacrifice HIS MEANT LIFE FOR US -- the abundant life of eternal love and forgiveness.

Tonite - we remember our innocent friend's death and give thanks to God for the NEW LIFE we have been given through his sacrifice.

Good Friday -- 3rd Word
Redeemer Lutheran - Milwaukee
March 31, 1972

"THE WORD OF COMMITMENT"

"Woman, behold your son! . . . Behold your mother

'I will end the war in Viet Nam during my term; I will reduce the taxes of every American citizen; I will improve the educational and economic conditions of the poor and elderly; I will control consumer prices; I will establish a foreign policy which will enable international neighbors an opportunity for self government etc.' So go the verbal commitments saturating our ears and communication media during these political days in Wisconsin. Verbal political commitments: words which speak far more dramatically than the actions which follow them.

^{there} But cancerous commitments are not only unique to political prophets. Conscious uncommitment seems to be apparent throughout our society.

Drugs and dropping out among ^{young adults} youth appear to be symptomatic of an uncommitted and very transitory lifestyle. I am really disturbed when I realize that older youth ^{EVEN} in this congregation have lost ambition, goals, commitments to church and family ^{just} and all this when they have lived in an ^{age of} abundance and privilege. ^{environment of}

^{such} I am told that I don't understand because my values are so much different. I'm sorry but I can't believe that. The values of commitment and ambition toward a goal in life are not unique to me -- they are humanly basic and universally timeless.

But in copping out, youth are only imitating their elders. They are taught the principles of love and compassion; but they observe the principles of prejudice and exploitation.

Profit above all has been revealed to them as the chief principle governing human relationships. Fun, pleasure, and Rowan & Martin humor have become the programmed culture and sedative for leisure; patience, struggle, and commitment cannot be priorities in an age of *instant-everything and pill-popping remedies.*

And ^{what} sacred institutions? Like marriage and manogomy. I'm afraid they've also been infected *by our* disposable technology. The rule seems to be only commit yourself until a newer and better model comes along.

And the Church and its message? Well, that seems to be the habitation for the elderly. Today's jet ~~set~~ ^{set} are too busy serving themselves-- committing ~~oneself~~ to a relationship with Christ might decrease the profits.

How easy it is to get caught up with the manifestations of this mentality. We can't avoid it -- it engulfs every institution, organization, and lifestyle, including the church.

But what has all this to do with the third word from Jesus? A lot. A lot if we seriously consider the three persons described in this part of the narrative. For the words: "Woman, behold your son! . . . Behold your mother" are words of real commitment.. . commitment which sees beyond itself.

Let's identify the characters and their examples of commitment. First, there is Mary, the mother of Jesus.

How does a mother feel in the presence of ^a ~~her~~ criminal son? How much of a commitment do you have to a child you have brought into this world? Mary's presence at the foot of the cross answers these questions -- you have an eternal commitment to love that child. But it's not easy to be a committed mother to a criminally *accused* son.

And more than that -- to a son who had deserted and denied you during his lifetime. For Mary once went with her family to request that Jesus return to the household. And what was Jesus' response:

(Matt. 12:46-50) "One of the people there said to Jesus, 'Look, your mother and brothers are standing outside, and they want to speak with you.' Jesus answered, 'Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?' Then he pointed to his disciples and said: 'Look! Here are my mother and my brothers! For the person who does what my Father in heaven wants him to do is my brother, my sister, my mother.'"

Here stands His mother, Mary -- the one whom he in one sense had rejected -- here she stands loving her accused son. That is real commitment-- loving, caring, accepting, even after being rejected.

We take Mary's place today. We, the Church, are standing at the foot of His cross. And we like Mary know that today he is not rejecting us. He is dying for us. Have we committed ourselves to him like his mother, Mary?

Do we still love those persons who have denied and rejected us? How about the ones who have been rejected by society? The divorcess, the poverties, the sicklies--those who don't fit into a good religious mold? Have we as the Church seen that our commitment is to love, and care and accept the unacceptable? *pass*

But Mary is not alone. John stands beside her. John, the disciple whom *Jesus* he felt most near. *to*. John represents the friend who stands by until the very end. That's real commitment. Not copping out when facing the prospect of defeat. Not deserting when you may be thinking in your own mind that your friend has let you down.

We stand in John's place today. And I cannot believe that we see LOYALTY as a commitment and virtue of a by-gone era. If we have come here to stand in John's place, then we cannot desert Christ after we leave this tabernacle. We therefore cannot run away from the struggles of humanity -- whether their white or black or bloody or painful -- we won't drop out from Christ's presence, because we are loyally committed to sharing his love and forgiveness even when it may mean personal defeat.

Finally we look directly at Jesus and hear his words: "Mother, behold your son. . . Behold your mother." That is real commitment to the will of God. For in the midst of agony and persecution, the man Jesus was more concerned about the needs of those he loved.

I can believe in that kind of a person -- because his commitment in life goes beyond his own egotistic and selfish concerns. I can trust in that man Jesus because even at his physical worst he is most concerned about my physical and emotional best. I can worship that kind of Lord Jesus because he has committed himself to loving and forgiving me forever as long as I turn to him and recognize my own inadequacies and limitations. Yes, Jesus' third word is truly a great word of commitment. + confidence.

For in that word to Mary and John, and to each of us standing at the foot of His cross, we come to know that Jesus ministers to the whole person, not just to the needs of his soul. Jesus' words here are not great pious or theological *plattitudes*?, they are words of comfort to the commonplace Monday thru Friday needs of people, namely, a source of support and companionship.

As Jesus dies on the cross, he does not beg for sympathy and pious words; rather, he seeks to fill the commonplace needs of those he has loved.

Jesus' words, "mother, behold your son! ... Behold Your mother!" did not allow Mary or John -- nor do they allow you and me to gush with tears of sorrow and despair.

Rather *these are* words of comforting commitment -- they give his loved ones a new purpose and responsibility for their lives. We might well remember *this* when we lose a loved one -- we must seek new purpose and responsibility for our lives. Because that's living with a commitment to Christ.

"Woman, behold your son! Behold your mother!" is one way in which Christ proclaims to us that he has committed himself to meeting our most basic human needs -- He tells us as he told Mary and John . . . Go and do likewise, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

that requires more of a commitment than can be given by any politician, drop out or jet setter.
He fulfills more than any commitment offered by any politician, drop out, or jet setter.

Good Friday
Redeemer Lutheran - Milwaukee
April 20, 1973

NO ONE CAN DO IT ALONE

"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

"Pastor, I feel so alone these days. I just feel that everyone has deserted me. The doctor used to come in at least once a day. Now he comes in twice a week -- most of the time he just stops at the nurses' station. I feel the same way about the family. They come but seem so distant when they're here. No one seems to want to be here - even the nurses who used to talk with me are NOW in a hurry to leave the room. I almost feel like God has deserted me, Pastor."

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Do you perceive a similarity between Jesus' fourth word from the cross and the words of this terminally ill patient from her hospital bed. This fourth word of the cross has a variety of modern synonyms. It is one word pastors hear from the lips of many throughout the year.

" I feel so alone."

"Why has everyone deserted me."

"Nobody seems to care."

"No one visits me anymore."

"My God - have you deserted me?"

These are the words of agonizing isolation. They are regularly expressed by anyone who feels he has been deserted. And so we have the same expression from Jesus on the cross.

I personally can admire and worship the man who in the agony of crucifixion says: 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.' But I must worship and admire from a distance, because I know that nothing in me is capable

of that selfless reaction to suffering. But the man who in pain cries out, "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?" reflects the human condition I best understand. He has entered the darkest mystery of human life-- the mystery of defeated goodness and victorious evil-- the mystery of human lostness and abandonment. Standing by his cross, I recognize him as one who has shared the tragedy and uncertainty of human life TO THE LAST FULL MEASURE.

Most of us have known the feeling of these words spoken by Jesus. It comes over us when we feel that under the circumstances of our pain-- THAT GOD DOESN'T CARE -- THAT GOD OFFERS NO HELP-- THAT GOD HAS TURNED AWAY HIS FACE AND FORGOTTEN. That was Jesus' feeling at this moment. There is consolation for us in just knowing that God in his son has experienced this level of ALONENESS AND SEPARATION.

And we are led to believe from this word that FACING DEATH must always be an utterly alone feeling. For if Jesus in his humanity felt so utterly alone, we can surely recognize that reality for human life today. There is consolation in just knowing that EVEN THE LORD experienced the feelings of loneliness and separation as death sought to snuff out the light of the world.

But there is also instructive merit in this word. For if EVEN Jesus could experience momentary feelings of despair as death approached, then our ministry to the severely depressed or dying should take on THIS AWARENESS DIMENSION. In other words, we should seek to be accepting of despairing remarks from the person who is experiencing this level of aloneness. WE MUST COME TO THE REALIZATION THAT THESE EXPRESSIONS ARE OFTEN NEEDED OUTLETS for any person who sees his life passing away.

One thing we know for certain. God did not reject his son due to the utterance of a despairing phrase. We are called to live in that image of God. We are called to recognize that EVEN DESPAIRING phrases are often necessary expressions in man's battle with *depression* death. Like our God, we cannot reject anyone for his momentary need to express his utter aloneness and separation.

But as Jesus says, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" there is another important dimension of his expression which we must comprehend. For the question looms before us: Does Jesus feel forsaken by God? Does he feel that his Father has deserted him?

I personally find it difficult to answer this question in the affirmative. I do not believe that Jesus EVER FELT utterly forsaken by God per se. For HOW would it then be possible for him to say: Father, for give them -- Father into Thy hands I commend My Spirit. These expressions clearly indicate that Jesus still felt in union with his Father.

Well then, how could he say: My God, my God, why hast THOU forsaken me?! I believe he could say this BECAUSE HE FELT FORSAKEN -- HE FELT DESERTED BY THE EARTHLY PRESENCE OF GOD! He felt forsaken by the INCARNATED PRESENCE OF GOD.

Jesus had been forsaken by his disciples -- by the twelve who knew the power of God better than anyone else. He had been forsaken by his own people of Israel, by Pilate who washed his hands of the whole affair, by the crowd that cried aloud, "Crucify him, crucify him!"

And so as Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" - he is saying: My God, where is the presence of your people-- your Holy Presence which I INSTILLED in the twelve and these people HAS VIRTUALLY

DISAPPEARED! I feel forsaken by these WHO HAVE BEEN CALLED TO BE YOUR PEOPLE. In my greatest moment of need -- at a time when I most need to see YOUR HOLY PRESENCE in them surrounding me -- your holy presence from them is gone.

And so Jesus says: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Why has your incarnated presence DESERTED ME? Jesus had NOT BEEN FORSAKEN by Almighty God, but he had been forsaken by the POWER OF GOD ON EARTH!

You and I today represent the POWER OF GOD ON EARTH. And as we RUN AWAY from that power to love, to forgive, to show compassion, to uplift the underdog-- as we DENY that incarnated power of God within us, THEN JESUS CONTINUES TO CRY OUT: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

As we desert that friend or relative who lies alone in pain on his sickbed, Jesus cries out: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

As we forsake the Indian or Black man or any other person who has been dealt the scorn or prejudice of the majority, then Jesus cries out again: My God, why have you forsaken me?

As we run away from our own guilt -- as we fail to confess the pollution of our own existence -- as we hide from the truth and deceive even those who may be closest to us: then Jesus continues to cry out: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.

God has given us the power to incarnate his loving presence in our lives. He gave that same power to his first disciples, and they forgot about it at a time ~~when~~ it was most needed. That Godly presence is MOST NEEDED today -- we need to share that loving presence of God with a despairing ~~world~~ *upright world*.

To do so will mean that the DESPAIR WILL BE WIPED AWAY, and the power of God will be

manifested in its place. Under such a heaven on earth, Jesus' cry may still be heard, but it will only be a momentary one. For the forsakenness of ALONESNESS will be replaced by the security of the INCARNATED LOVE OF GOD, *as well as the Eternity of God.*

God grant us the faith TO INCARNATE ~~THE~~ LOVE IN ALL OUR EARTHLY RELATIONSHIPS.

AMEN.

Good Friday
Redeemer Lutheran - Milwaukee
April 20, 1973

"ANYONE'S PARADISE NOW!"

"And the thief said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power.' And Jesus said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'"

Jesus promises paradise - promises paradise to a thief. What could that paradise be like? What picture do you have of that paradise?

Obviously, none of us has a complete or accurate picture. But as I imagine the life of that thief, I can envision some real possibilities for that paradise.

Paradise - for him - has got to be the absence of hostility and punishment when they are most deserved.

Paradise has got to be forgiveness when vindictiveness would have been a natural.

Paradise has got to be eternal concern where infinite disregard had been earned.

Paradise is love received when no payment has been made for it.

Paradise is having the Father hug you to him when you have previously profaned him.

Yes, Paradise is PARDON GIVEN, when DAMNATION is DUE.

Jesus says to the man who DESERVED punishment and vindictiveness, who had disregarded love and profaned the Father, TODAY, SHALT THOU BE WITH ME IN PARADISE.

In other words Jesus said: Today shalt thou receive forgiveness, eternal concern, Fatherly love and pardon. To receive these is to be IN PARADISE.

And what did this thief do to enter paradise? HE REPENTED AND ASK JESUS TO REMEMBER HIM.

Jesus did not ask the thief for a dissertation to prove his worthiness. Jesus did not subject the thief to moral or verbal abuse for his past. Jesus did not demand an elaborate prayer of confession. Jesus IN NO WAY intimidated this thief.

He listened to the thief's brief confession and request. And then he promised him PARADISE!

My Christian friends, let us ALLOW this second word to be instructive for our piety. Let us be aware of the FACTS OF FAITH -- that to be worthy of paradise DOES NOT MEAN WE ARE TO BE PERFECT! Penitent, Yes! But perfect, impossible! We are worthy of the Father's pardon NOT ON THE BASIS OF OUR PIOUS PERFORMANCES, but on our willingness to repent.

And yet how ^{often} absent this word is from our everyday lives! How often we make ONE ANOTHER pay dearly for the sins of the past! How often we DO NOT PARDON even after a person HAS CONFESSED, and re-confessed, and re-confessed! We so often seem to find so much more glory in punishment than we do in paradise.

And yet we're faced today with a man whose life had to be openly corrupt and immoral -- a man who had evidently done little to create a good image for himself -- and yet in response to this man's brief confession, Jesus says: TODAY shalt thou be with me in paradise.

Notice that Jesus says: TODAY. He does not OFFER PARADISE on the "confess now receive later" plan. That does not mean it will not be a future reality. But we recognize from this second word that paradise is also A PRESENT REALITY. WE LIVE IN PARADISE IMMEDIATELY UPON RECEIVING GOD'S PARDON. And as his pardon was communicated by Jesus while on earth, that privilege is ours today. We too can share

his pardon and thereby make PARADISE a reality for someone RIGHT NOW.

That means, of course, that you and I, like Jesus, must offer paradise to the penitent thieves of our day. We are led to do this because we realize that we have all been in the thief's position.

We have all felt at one time or another REJECTED for something we have done. And at that time we found it difficult to imagine BEING FORGIVEN. And yet when we made our confession, forgiveness was forthcoming -- or at least it should have been. Our faith tells us it is always forthcoming from Christ and those who follow him.

And so, the dying thief upon the cross symbolizes all those who have been cast aside by respectable society. . . ourselves included at one time or another. But Jesus looks beyond any label -- whether thief, mugger, prostitute, or otherwise. Jesus sees a human soul, hungering and thirsting after righteousness -- a soul repentant and eager for reconciliation.

Jesus sees all persons as created in the image of God - thus persons of inestimable worth. Jesus even in his dying is still SO CONCERNED about another that he hears a confession and speaks a word of reassurance and hope. And HEARING THAT WORD is being in paradise IMMEDIATELY!

Yes, we are called to CONTINUE to SPEAK that word of reassurance and hope. We are called especially to speak it to those who have been cast aside today by a so-called respectable society. A society that too often finds its respectability in TREASURES ON EARTH, rather than in the PARADISE OF GOD.

If we find ourselves as God's people ONLY REASSURING EACH OTHER -- only listening to each other's confessions -- that is, only associating with respectable Christians -- then we have fashioned God's kingdom and paradise INTO AN ELITISTS SOCIAL CLUB.

When we have allowed that to be his church, then we have allowed his church to conform to the world. For the way of the world is special membership cards, and special keys, and secret oaths, and all the other categories of exclusiveness. But God's HOLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH claims a much more comprehensive membership.

For God's way is PARADISE NOW for ANYONE, -- regardless of society's labels, -- for anyone who trusts Christ as his Lord and so confesses his sin. There is little room for arrogance, prejudice, or narrow particularism in a fellowship of faith that believes in Jesus' second word from the cross.

For there are RESERVED SEATS for everyone in Jesus' community of faith - just as Paradise is reserved FOR ANYONE who repents to the Lord of that community.

A society such as ours -- which too often indiscriminately promotes segregation, and incarceration, and condemnation sorely NEEDS to hear the thief on the cross say to his Lord: Remember me, when you come into your kingly power.

And that Lord responds -- and asks us to repond in the same way, without intimidation or damnation -- TODAY YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE!

AMEN.

GOOD FRIDAY (1st Word)
Redeemer Lutheran - Milwaukee
April 12, 1974

"DOING WHAT COMES UNNATURALLY"

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Luke 23:34

We must be very clear about one thing from the very beginning. There is nothing romantic about the process of dying - about the way of death. It is often tough - many times messy - and sometimes even a gory way to go. Many of us have had experiences WITH THE WAY OF DEATH that have convinced us of its UN-romantic nature.

No one really desires an encounter with the way of death. IN fact, people today often arrange life so that they need only face the most minimal exposure to the way of death. We are considered today a death-denying society.

We confirm this in many ways. For instance, 'death' is a taboo subject. We even avoid using the word. We often fail to visit dying patients as regularly as those routinely ill. Children are often sent on vacations when terminal illness strikes a family - or otherwise they are told that "Mommy or Daddy has gone on a long trip and probably won't come back"-- ~~this often causes a suspicious distrust of adults that will live on for years in a child's mind.~~ And then there are those long and controversial discussions whether a patient should be told the truth...

Needless to say, there is no easy answer to any ~~dying~~ situations. But so often, rather than dealing with dying on an individual basis, we lump all situations together and handle the way of death BY SIMPLY AVOIDING IT. And so our denial makes clear our UNROMANTIC FEELINGS about the way of death.

Yet here we are again on this Good Friday. And the situation we are faced with IS THE WAY OF

1st Word

DEATH. And yet none of us HAS WANTED to avoid the encounter with Jesus' death today. In fact, for most of us, we've yearned to be here again on this Good Friday! Isn't that strange?!? It seems so contradictory to the way we normally react to the process of dying. Why is it that we can so WILLINGLY and WANTINGLY face the death of Jesus on the cross?

Surely it's more than just a nostalgic remembrance! Surely facing his death should be no easier than facing any other loved one's death-- even though he died several hundred years ago. Surely we don't talk about Jesus "passing away"-- we talk about his DYING. How is it then, that we can face this terminal scene so courageously?!?

You and I may have our individual reasons, but I believe there is one MAJOR reason that we can ALL "handle" this scene without running away from it. And that reason is that even in the UNROMANTIC grip of death, Jesus offers what we need most, but what we least expect. Instead of offering what would be NATURAL for any man facing death, he offers the most UN-NATURAL. He says: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

Those words make it possible for me to face this scene BECAUSE instead of death-giving words, they are life-giving words. Instead of words which make me aware of my limitations AND OF HIS, Jesus shares words which make me aware of my possibilities - words which give me hope -- words which uplift rather than cause me to feel that HE or I HAVE SUFFERED ANY DEFEAT!

This is the story of God's relationship to his people through Jesus Christ. Whenever God's people were staring into a view of their own limitations, whether caused by their own foolishness or not, God provided them new possibilities - *esp.* through the ministry of Jesus.

And so when the crowd was facing the limitations of loaves and fishes, there was Jesus to provide

enough for the satisfaction of everyone. When James and John became obsessed with an arrogant and pride-filled limitation of their discipleship, there was Jesus to offer them a life-giving word -- telling them that prominence and greatness are achieved through servanthood.

When Mary and Martha were suffering defeat due to the death of their brother Lazarus, there was Jesus with the word of Hope: "I am the resurrection and the life, he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

And now here is Jesus - in the process of dying. And surrounding him is a mob which has foolishly condemned him. ~~And we are among them~~ - for each of us FOOLISHLY condemns his way when we rebel against his love. It would be so humanly natural for him TO SPIT upon those who deny him. It would be so humanly understandable for him to DAMN that mob of murderers.

But he does the UN-NATURAL. He gives those people and each of us WHAT WE NEED MOST - the assurance of our Father's forgiveness. And he gives us this IN ORDER THAT we might be delivered from our lost relationship to our loving Father. He says - Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.

~~That~~ ^{Emptiness} was our condition before this word of hope - we were lost - we were madly caught up in the emotion of a despairing mob. But forgiveness delivers us from our limitations - we can again see the loving-kindness of our Father, And there is hope in that vision - even in the midst of death. Because a renewed vision of the Father is ALWAYS life-giving -- ALWAYS uplifting, even when we have foolishly sinned.

Yes, when Jesus says: Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do -- Jesus is not leaving us in a state of KNOW-NOTHINGNESS.

1st Word. *Satirity* *4-*
Forgiveness delivers us from the emptiness of our mob-actions. From the emptiness of our mob-jealousies, and our culture-convictions, and our natural desires to be deceptive and hurtful.

hopelessness
Forgiveness does not leave us feeling our limitations -- rather, we are filled with new strength. We are freed from guilts of past separations - not in order to go out again to find a new victim to destroy, but rather FREED to forgive and serve in the image of our Lord.

Yes, we can face this terminal scene of the cross courageously BECAUSE we are NOT defeated by it. Jesus does not offer us words of defeat, but rather words of hope. He does not focus our attention UPON his limitations, but rather upon God's possibilities--namely, the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus' confrontation with death IS NOT a moment of defeat for us, it is another MOMENT of hope. For even in the grip of death, Jesus continues to offer us God's life-giving Word--the word of forgiveness.

He calls us to do the same. .. to make of paramount importance in our lives his LIFE-GIVING WORD - forgiveness for each other. If we can carry that word with us through our relationships in life - and even to our relationships at death -- THEN WE TOO WILL BE ABLE TO FACE ONE ANOTHER courageously IN LIFE and EVEN IN THE PROCESS OF DEATH knowing that there is nothing in all creation that will separate us from the love of God.

amen.

GOOD FRIDAY

Luth. Church of the Master - Troy

March 28, 1975

"CONFIDENCE TO THE END"

"It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit." And having said this, he breathed his last breath."

Luke 23:44-46

The 1st Word of our Lord from the cross.
A word of commitment, not despair or gloom.

His last words -- words from a Psalm that Jesus must have known by heart -- the 31st Psalm, the 5th verse:

"Into thy hands I commit my spirit, thou hast redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God."

The Lord's last words - words of supreme confidence. Not words of hopelessness and despair.

Here was a man who throughout his ministry never uttered words of hopelessness. A man who never gave up -- because he was a man who lived in the hands of his Father. And that could only mean confidence for Jesus.

That is our mood tonight -- one of confidence, not hopelessness. Oh - to be sure, our mood and worship tonight is one of sorrow, but not hopelessness. We leave here in silence tonight-- the silence of sorrow -- but also silently confident of a new day around the horizon.

"Into thy hands I commit my spirit. . ." Our Lord's last words -- but not clutching words. Not words of bargaining -- trying to make a deal with God to have a few more "alive" moments. No, these were words of acceptance -- the recognition that he was destined to BE ONE WITH GOD.

And such was Jesus' life. Always a recognition and acceptance that he and the Father were one . There was no separation from the Father in life-- there would be no separation from the Father in death.

So it is for us who gather here tonight. We gather tonight - and always - to again re-align ourselves into the ONENESS with the Father. We do this so there will not be any separation during life -- thereby, we, like Jesus, can be confident there will be no separation IN DEATH.

Yes - "Into thy hands I commit my spirit." Finally - his last words clearly recognize that the victorious hands of life are not his -- but the Father's. In the end, it is only the Father's ~~outstretched~~ outstretched hand that gives us the victory over death. Yes - death was not Jesus' end - the outstretched hand of the Father was his end.

And so in Jesus' life - he never saw the end of life as a total of his credits. Egocentricity dies with the last breath of life. For Jesus - the end of life was to unite his spirit with the purpose of God -- then, and only then, does one end life with a victory. For Jesus - living life meant being ever united with the Father's hand.

Like little children afraid to climb the stairs in the dark unless their father take them by the hand, so we cannot find our way unless our Father grasps our hand in his. Once we feel that powerful hand supporting us - we can go on and not be afraid.

even

We can reach the end of this life and be assured that our Father has not deserted us.

The end is as its beginning - in the grasp of the Father's hand.

And so - this last word from the Lord -- like all his words -- confident ONENESS WITH GOD.

So - in the image of our Lord - may we commend our spirits - our whole beings into God's hands during life . . . so ~~that~~ we will do so confidently EVEN AT LIFE'S END.

(Guards drape the altar): *Exting. candle.*

"Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit."
And having said this, he breathed his last breath.

*Christ is dead. We await
his Resurrection.*

GOOD FRIDAY
1st Word
Preached at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
Luth Church of the Master
April 13, 1979

"EXPECTING THE WORST ... GETTING THE BEST"

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Let's be clear about one thing ~~as we conclude this day~~ --- there is nothing romantic about the process of dying. Dying is often tough ... many times messy ... and sometimes grotesquely gory. There are few of us here today who have not had unhappy experiences with the WAY OF DEATH. Few of us need to be convinced that death is very un-romantic.

In fact, few of us really want any encounters with death at all. For most of us its the worst thing that can happen in life. Today, there are all kinds of death-and-dying seminars being held all over the place. But no matter how brave we may act - let's face it ... when death is staring straight at us, most of us want to deny it or run away from it.

And yet - here we are on this Good Friday ... and a Friday the 13th at that. Here we are again as we have been on many Good Fridays starring death straight in the face. How is it that none of us want to avoid the death of Jesus? Why is it that most of us have really yearned to be here again to face Jesus' death? Why do we run away from so many other death situations -- and with Jesus we can hardly wait to hear all those agonizing words from the cross.

Can it possibly be that we have some kind of sadistic tendency toward Jesus? Do we really enjoy ~~rehashing his suffering~~? Do we get some kind of nostalgic kick out of Jesus' misfortune? Surely - it should be no easier to face his

death than the death of another beloved person. How is it that we can face his terminal scene so courageously?

No doubt there are many reasons ... and of course, Easter Sunday is chief among them. But let me suggest another major reason that we can handle this scene without running from it. Namely - when Jesus was in the un-romantic grip of death -- he offered what you and I need most, but what we would expect least. Instead of offering what would be natural for any man at his worst -- Jesus offers the very best that any man can offer: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Instead of giving death-giving-words ... instead of slander and other filth ... instead of selfish blasphemy against God - Jesus offers the life-giving-word of forgiveness. Instead of words which make us aware of Jesus' limitations -- he offers words which make us aware of the great possibilities for those who believe in God. Instead of despair... Jesus offers words of hope.... words which *uplift* rather than words which cause further defeat.

This is the story of God's relationship to his people. Whenever God's people were face- to - face with their own limitations, God provided them with new possibilities. That was the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ ... and he maintains it even after the nails have pierced his skin on the cross.

So it was - that when the crowd was facing the limitations of a few loaves and fishes - there was Jesus to provide the basic human needs for many. So it was that when James and John were trying to make the kingdom of God into a game of politicking for position - there was Jesus with a basin and a towel TEACHING an uplifting message about greatness .

When Martha and Mary were defeated by the

death of their brother, Lazarus - there was Jesus with the word of life: "I am the resurrection and the life... and whoever believes in me will never die."

Such was the entire ministry of our Lord, even now as we observe him on the cross. Again, as he often was, he is surrounded by a mob.... a mob which represents a rebellious, hard-nosed world ... a world which calls his love foolishness. You would think that Jesus in his humanness would have SPIT upon all those who were denying him.

But instead, when he's at his worst ... he offers his best. He gives the mob what they need the most - the assurance of God's forgiveness. In the face of the world's rejection - Jesus Christ still offers a word of hope.

And so it is that we can face this terminal scene of crucifixion COURAGEOUSLY - because we are not defeated by it. When we would expect words of defeat from Jesus ... when we would expect to be condemned and slandered by him ... instead he offers THE WORD OF HOPE.

~~When we would expect God to shower his limitations upon us - instead he offers us his greatest possibility - the forgiveness of our destructive and cowardly sin.~~

So it is that we do not want to deny the death of Jesus -- we do not want to run away from this event ... because in his death we are offered the very best that God can give us: the word of **ETERNAL LIFE**,

That same Christ on the cross calls us to go and do the same. To offer his word of forgiving hope when we have been unfairly persecuted. What a great gift to receive...

what a great gift to offer to the world ... the
gift of forgiveness when people least expect
it. To be able to forgive and be forgiven
when things are possibly at their worst.

God help us TO LIVE ... and TO DIE by
saying: Father, forgive them ... forgive me ...
forgive us ..., for the destructive things
that we have done... *and for the things*

*that we know
not that we
have done.*

AMEN

GOOD FRIDAY
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
April 4, 1980

"COMING HOME"

"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

It had been a long and uncomfortable four weeks in that hospital bed. But finally the word came from the doctor on the 26th day -- "I'm going to discharge you tomorrow." What a thrill after all the agony! I shouted out to myself: "I'm finally going home! Dear God, I'm finally going home! My suffering is finally over -- I'm finally going home!"

The rest of that 26th day flashed by -- the suitcase was quickly packed, the tear-filled goodbyes were said to all those angels of mercy on 3rd floor - and I even felt good enough to wash my hair after 24 days of becoming greasier, and greasier. It was the 23rd of December -- there could have been no greater Christmas gift than to be discharged on Christmas Eve.

And so the morning of December 24th came. I walked uneasily to the car. My friends were shocked when they saw me -- I had lost 40 pounds in those 27 days. One of my teaching associates took my picture and told me she was going to enter it in the Aushwitz-Look-Alike Contest.

But how glad I was to get into their car to begin the 120 mile ride to home. The familiar terrain of southern Wisconsin sped by quickly -- and soon after a drowsy period I saw the city limits of Oshkosh. And ten minutes later -- we were pulling up to that familiar white frame, story-and-a-half bungalow.

I was fighting back the tears of joy -- and there at the top of the steps was my dad. Never before had my father's hands felt so reassuring -- They had always been the tough hands of a skilled laborer -- but today there was a real warmth in those strong hands. There I was -- embraced by

the hands of my father! What a thrill it was to be home -- to be 24 years old -- yet being held securely by those strong hands of a loving father.

Maybe you also have had a similar experience? Obviously - your circumstances might have been very different from mine. But one thing for certain -- I'm sure! It's really great to be home -- to be held secure in loving arms - especially when we have experienced a period of separation - or pain - or the possible fear of never getting home again.

At this very moment - 50 American hostages continue to pray for freedom from the dehumanizing fear of their bondage. Can you imagine what they will feel like the day they are brought home?!? Can you imagine their relief when they are reunited with their families?!? Can you imagine their thoughts and words when they finally are assured that their nightmare is all over?!?!

When that moment comes -- you can be assured that they will be crying out with shouts of victory. They will experience a peace never known to them before. They will never have such a "coming home" experience as that will be!!

Hopefully -- we've all had a good "coming home" experience in our lives. After separation - after torment - after a fight with the kid down the street - after the hardship of trying to make it on our own - after rejection or despair--
WE ALL KNOW HOW GREAT IT IS TO COME HOME TO
OUTSTRETCHED LOVING ARMS THAT WILL SUPPORT US!!

Dear friends -- can you see why this final word from the cross is such a great final word?!? It is a "coming home" word! It is not a word of despair - not a word of hopelessness - not a word of dismal "goodbye" to the world.

This final word is Jesus' "Coming Home" Cry!! It's a word bursting with the warmth of a son who is finally seeing his father's outstretched hands after a long separation. It's a word filled with peace and joy -- because there's nothing greater than coming home to a loving father after the torment of a cruel world.

"Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." The very word "father" here comes from the Aramaic, "Abba," which is often translated "Daddy." In essence, Jesus is saying, "Daddy, at last, I'm coming home!"

The earthly life of Christ does not end on a morbid, despairing note. His last expression is full of confidence and assurance. He commits his life to the loving hands of his father. It is not a moment with fear and trembling in his voice.

That kind of morbidity would be totally inconsistent with the life of Christ. Only an atheistic hollywood producer would picture Jesus Christ despairing in his last moments.

~~But~~ ^{of God's Father} That is not the picture for you and for me. We know that there is nothing greater than coming home to the loving arms of a strong, supportive father. And this is the last word from the cross -- not a clutching word, not a word of morbid hopelessness. But the expression of an obedient son who completely trusted the promises of his Father. A son who can confidently empty his life into the hands of his father.

May God strengthen you and me to trust his hands in the same way. What greater hands could we be given? What greater home could we be given -- than to be in the eternal care of Almighty God!

Today we have heard the call of God through Christ on the cross. We have been called to fight the good fight of faith by forgiving like Christ. We have been called to love each other as a mother loves her son. We have been called

to bless the hungry and thirsty. And now above all - we are being called to live with utter confidence in God's hands and home -- to totally entrust our lives to his care when that moment comes.

Every little Hebrew child was taught to say by his mother before going to sleep each night: this verse from Psalm 31: "Into thy hands I commend my spirit." Some thirty years before this moment on the cross in a home in Nazareth - a woman named Mary was tucking a boy named Jesus into bed and listening to him say: "Into thy hands I commend my spirit."

And now as that boy has become a man -- he climaxes his ministry on earth with the same confident words that he had learned as a child: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" Abba - Father - Daddy - I'm coming home."

And having said this - he breathed his last!

AMEN

GOOD FRIDAY

Ecumenical Good Friday Service
Epworth Methodist Church, Toledo

April 5, 1985

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Matt. 27:46

"Pastor, I feel so alone these days. I just feel that everyone has deserted me. The doctor used to come in at least once a day. Now he comes in twice a week ... most of the time he just stops at the nurses station. I feel the same about my family. Oh, they come -- but they seem so distant. They don't seem to want to even be near me anymore. In fact, no one seems to want to be here anymore. Even the nurses who used to talk with me every day ALWAYS SEEM TO BE HURRYING and SCURRYING OUT OF MY ROOM. You know, Pastor, I almost feel like God has totally deserted me!"

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Have you ever heard a patient, a friend, a loved one express these words to you. Maybe not the exact words -- but maybe like the words of the terminal patient that I expressed just a moment ago. This fourth word from the cross is a very common, everyday word -- it's expressed by thousands every day in different ways. It's a word that every pastor and every caring Christian has heard from the lips of many parishoners. Words like ...

"I feel so alone these days."

"Why has everyone deserted me?"

"Nobody seems to care anymore! They've all left me!"

"No one wants to visit me anymore. I've been abandoned!"

"My God, My God, why have you deserted me?"

These are the words of agonizing isolation. These are the words of loneliness and rejection. These are the words of depression and desertion. These are the words not only of your friends and mine -- these are also the words of your Lord and mine, Jesus the Christ.

I personally can admire and worship the man who in the agony of the crucifixion says: "Father, forgiven them, for they know not what they do." But in truth -- I must admire and worship that man from a distance. For I am not capable of that kind of selfless love in the face of suffering. But the man who in pain cries out: "My God, why have you forsaken me?"

That man, that human condition I can understand. That man has entered the darkest mystery of human life. That man has tasted the defeat of goodness and the pain of human lostness and abandonment. Standing by the man at that cross -- I recognize him as one who has SHARED THE TOTAL TRAGEDY OF HUMAN LIFE -- ONE WHO HAS TASTED THE FULL MEASURE OF LIFE!

Very few of us here today have not known the feeling of this fourth word spoken by Jesus. We too have had those moments where we have wondered IF GOD TRULY CARES ... DOES GOD REALLY WANT TO HELP US HAS GOD TURNED AWAY FROM MY SUFFERING AND SORROW AND FORGOTTEN ME??? There is some consolation in just knowing that our Lord ... our Savior Jesus has experienced THE TOTAL HUMAN EXPRESSION OF ABANDONMENT ... he knew the feeling of desertion and abandonment!

So what constructive merit can we construe from this word? Where is its redeeming quality?? First, from a purely human perspective, we can say THAT FACING DEATH MUST ALWAYS BE AN UTTERLY LONELY REALITY! For if Jesus felt so alone and deserted, then we can certainly affirm and recognize that reality for all human life. There is human consolation in just knowing that Jesus our Lord experienced feelings of loneliness and separation as death sought to snuff out his light for the world.

But there is even further merit in this. Since we allow our Lord this expression -- then why should we not allow the same expression from our loved ones? There is an awareness dimension in this word for our ministry to the terminally ill and dying. Namely, we can be accepting of despairing remarks from our Christian friends who are experiencing death and dying. In short, it's o.k. to allow our loved ones to express their feelings of abandonment or isolation. Jesus had to do it; so do our loved ones have to do it. It doesn't mean they are faithless; it only means they need an outlet as they see life passing away. They need relief from their pain of separation! Relief comes when they feel permission so say whatever is on their mind or in their hearts.

One thing we know for certain: God did not reject Jesus due to his utterance of this phrase from the cross. God allowed his Son to express the fulness of humanity -- even words of desertion and aloneness. We are called to live in that image of God -- to allow our loved ones whatever expression of isolation and aloneness they need in the moment of death or dying.

But there must be greater merit in this word than just human consolation. We know we all flee from death. We run from our own deaths ... as well as the deaths of our loved ones. We do not want to face the reality. And when facing it, we know how important it is to feel free to express our feelings of separation and abandonment.

But where is the real hope in this word? Where is the real redeeming quality of this word? The only way we can answer that question is by asking the same words that Jesus himself was pleading. "Why God?" Why the cross?? Why this suffering reality? Why the desertion of friends and disciples? Why this humiliation?? Why the loneliness of Golgatha instead of the jubilation of Jerusalem?

Prof. Richard Hoefler from Lutheran Southern Seminary answers the question quite simply by saying "Because life was not being taken away from us but rather LIFE WAS BEING GIVEN TO US." God did not lose his Son on the cross, he gave his son for all of us. That's why John says: God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son!" God gives the gift of life through Christ -- a ransom for all!

It's like the story of the young man who returned hom from Vietnam. An empty sleeve hung where once his arm had been. A well-meaning friend remarked: "We're so sorry that you lost your arm." To this the young soldier quickly responded: "I didn't lose it. I gave it!" God did not lose his Son on Calvary's cross; he gave his son for our sake!! God did not forsake Jesus or us on Golgatha. He paid the price with his own life. He gave up his life that we might know he's willing to shed his blood for us. He will go so far as to shed his blood TO ASSURE US THAT WE ARE LOVED AND FORGIVEN!!

And so Jesus asks: "Why God?" And we ask: "Why God?" Why the cross? Why Calvary? Why Golgatha? Why this moment of aloneness and isolation? And the only answer to be given IS TO CHANGE US!!

God humbles himself and becomes obedient unto death TO RESCUE US -- TO CHANGE US SO THAT WE MIGHT BE MORE LIKE HIM!! Calvary changes us BECAUSE NOW WE ARE FORGIVEN! Golgatha changes us BECAUSE NOW WE KNOW WE ARE LOVED! The cross changes us BECAUSE NOW WE NO LONGER HAVE TO FEAR DEATH ... or to desert those who are dying around us!

Unlike the first disciples -- we will no longer forsake our Lord. Because we know WHY HE SUFFERED AND DIED ON THE CROSS! He died to forgive us, in order that we might live the power of that forgiveness as his body on earth.

We -- the body of Christ -- we are the incarnation of Christ's love in this world. We are here today, because unlike his first disciples, we have chosen NOT TO RUN AWAY FROM HIS DEATH. We will not desert our Lord, now or ever. In fact we are here to be empowered by his act on Calvary. We are here to be strengthened SO THAT WE MIGHT NEVER DESERT ANYONE WHO IS FEELING ALONE, ABANDONED, OR ISLOATED IN LIFE.

That is the significance of "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" That it might never happen again! That Jesus' disciples -- you and me -- might make certain that no one in this world will again feel like they have been deserted by God or his people.

That is the real merit of this fourth word: THAT GOD DID NOT TAKE HIMSELF AWAY FROM US ON CALVARY -- BUT RATHER THAT HE GAVE HIMSELF TOTALLY TO US THROUGH THE CROSS!! We have not been forsaken in any way by God - In Jesus Christ, he has given himself totally for our sake ... forgiven us completely ... loved us totally ... and assured us of eternal life now and forevermore!

Surely that ransom leaves no doubt in our minds THAT GOD IS OURS AND WE ARE HIS! Why Golgatha? Why the cross? That we might forever be changed ... rescued ... and redeemed. That the despair and depression of death might never be the last word on life. But that God has wiped away all tears ... that we will never be alone or deserted ... that we are his and are called to live in love, faithfulness, and confidence until the end!

AMEN

*be expressed -
but that such expression
will never be the
last word*

GOOD FRIDAY - 1986
Hope Lutheran Church - Noon
Christ Presbyterian Church - 6th Word
March 28, 1986
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"FINISHED - YET NOT ENDED!"

When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, "It is finished"; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

John 19:30

What is your life story? Let's face it - your life story and mine aren't much different ... at least when it comes to "finishing things." More than likely, most of us could easily write the following epitaph on our tombstones: "It was unfinished!" Isn't that the way life often is? Aren't you like me -- often feeling like many things are still hanging ... not quite complete ... not yet accomplished ... still waiting for resolution.

On my really brave days -- I will sit in the office and make a list of the number of things that I still have to do! The list is staggering. Just one area alone - the calls that I have not yet made ... the ones that I just never get around to -- that alone could keep me busy for well over a year. Let's face it -- there's a lot of unfinished business in our lives. There's a lot of cracks, a lot of holes, a lot of missing spaces and blanks to be filled. We aren't the perfect people we like everybody else to think we are. And this unfinished state usually fills us with a fairly real sense of guilt ... sometimes even despair. We ask: Will it ever be right? Will it ever be done? Will we ever get it the way we really want it?

But once in a great while we do have a brief glimpse of completion and fulfillment. Now and then something gets completed ... something seems perfect ... something turns out just the way it was supposed to. It may be as simple as baking a good coffee cake -- or it may be as complex as a corporate take-over where everything falls perfectly into place and everyone seems happy. There are those brief moments of total fulfillment ... where we say, "ah, at last everything is just right!"

(of Jesus' last moments on)

That's the spirit of this sixth word from the cross. Even in the tormented agony of his last breath, Jesus says: "It is finished!" "At last, everything is just right ... just the way it's supposed to be." Finally the ladder between heaven and earth has been completed. At last, the bridge over troubled waters has been spanned. The greatest expression of divine love has been fully achieved through the sacrifice of one man - "It is finished!"

This moment on Calvary is like a soldier returning

from a climactic battle of victory. He may be weary and battle scared, but he is not despairing as he says, "At last, it is finished." His cry is one of triumph and victory.

So also our Lord, hanging on that cross, is like a soldier coming home to his Father from a climactic battle. He has just faced the torment of hell -- rejection, ridicule, mockery, and the horrendous agony of crucifixion. But he has not been defeated by these forces of evil. He has seen the battle through to the bloody end. And now, it is finished. As we look at this soldier on the cross - he may be weary and bloody, but he is not despairing or dejected as he cries: "At last, it is finished!" He has triumphed; he has won the battle.

Jesus' last moment on Golgatha is like the builder who was laboring endlessly to finish the home for the newlywed couple before their wedding. He was tired and weary from the long hours, but he was not despairing when he called the bride and announced: "It is finished!"

Likewise, Jesus Christ, hanging on the cross, has finished building a mansion for his bride, the church. He was certainly tired and weary. He was certainly dirty from the shameful, degrading treatment given him. But he was not despairing when he said: "It is finished." He has built for you and me an eternal relationship with God -- an everlasting home that can never be taken away.

On Golgatha, Jesus completed God's business for each of us. We may be very unfinished with the things of this world; but with God, we have already received the finishing touch. God's business is that we should be one with him. And Jesus Christ fulfilled that task for us -- ALL ALONE ON THE CROSS. It is no longer unfinished ... incomplete. It is now finished! "Tetelestai" - totally done!

The Good News on Good Friday is that God finishes what most of us leave unfinished ... incomplete ... undone: OUR LOVE FOR HIM AND EACH OTHER. That's our story ... and it's the never-ending story of the Bible. Like the story of the ten lepers. Jesus finished cleansing ALL TEN. But how many finished thanking him?? Just one! What an unfinished response! How ungrateful! How incomplete! But isn't that the way we often are??!

Or even the case of Peter. This great disciple promised to be faithful forever! But confronted with his first opportunity for fidelity - and Peter blew it. He was totally unfaithful ... totally incomplete. He denied his Lord. He didn't finish his promise of faithfulness!!

Like the lepers and Peter, our response is often unfinished. But Jesus, being the Lord that he is, finishes everything for us. He completes our incompleteness. Jesus is more than a faithful talker; he is a faithful doer! When he said something, he also did it! He finished his sayings. He said, "Love your enemies." He said, "Pray for those who persecute you." He said, "Bless those who despise you." He said, "If someone asks you to go one mile, go two miles." These were not only said by Jesus, they were finished by Jesus. And now on the cross, he finishes the ultimate act of sacrificial love! And then says, "It is finished!" Love is complete. Salvation has been accomplished! God and man are now one! Everything is finally right, because his sacrificial love is complete. He has totally fulfilled everything he said he would do!! He has been faithful to us to the very end!!

So when Jesus says, "It is Finished!" he doesn't mean "It's All Over," he means "It's Just Beginning!" His death IS NOT THE END, but a new beginning for each of us. His death forgives yesterdays unfinished efforts. His death whitewashes the guilt of yesterday's mistakes. His death makes every day a new beginning; a new opportunity to finish what was left undone before.

In many ways, Christ's death on Golgatha is like the work of a great composer. Many composers complete their works with a final inscription: "finis." "It is finished!" The composition is complete. But that's not the end of the composition; in many ways, it's just the beginning. The composition is complete; the price has been paid through the composer's blood, sweat and tears. But now begins the endless hours and days of playing the composition. It's in the playing that the composition really comes to life.

So also with Christ's death on Golgatha. The composition has been written. The price has been paid. Christ has offered his blood, sweat and tears. Salvation with God has been achieved. But the symphony of that saving act must now be played and played endlessly in the world. The composer, Jesus Christ, has completed the composition, our salvation. We must now become the instruments of his symphony of love in the world.

And as we all know - each and every day we have been seeking to perfect his composition. Yet we also know, it is still quite unfinished. But God accepts us that way; in fact, he forgives our constant incompleteness. Not so that we'll stay incomplete, but so that we'll seek to make new beginnings each and every day. As he forgives us in that way, we never get tired of beginning anew our part in fulfilling his symphony of love.

That's why on this day, we say much more than just TGIF - Thank God It's Friday. We say, TGIGF - Thank God It's Good Friday. It is the day that God finished his composition of love for the world. Through Jesus Christ on on this Friday, God made us instruments forever of his symphony of salvation! What greater love could God have offered than to write "finis" at the end of our unfinished, incomplete, always sinful lives? Thank God, our salvation is finished ... and thank God, we continue to be his never-ending rhapsody of love for this world.

AMEN.

GOOD FRIDAY TRE ORE
Grace Lutheran Church 1:40 p.m.
March 24, 1989

"I T H I R S T !"

"After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said,
"I thirst." John 19:28

Professor Richard C. Hoefler from Lutheran Southern Seminary states that we are "shockingly jolted" by this fifth word, "I Thirst." This word drops us from the heights of theological mystery and holiness to the lowly depths of earthly physical needs. Should we really be considering this word at all? Can it possibly compare to the highly-charged theological integrity of the other six?

THE FIRST WORD - an unforgettable formula of forgiveness ... a jewel of divine grace.

THE SECOND WORD rings with decisive yet merciful judgment ... the pronouncement of peace and paradise to a penitent thief.

THE THIRD WORD - a reflection of our Lord's nobility of compassion for his beloved friend and bereaving mother.

THE FOURTH WORD - the universal confession of separation experienced by every son or daughter of God confronted by the lonely isolation of death.

THE SIXTH WORD - the kairos, the completeness, the fulfillment of mission finally realized ... the task of salvation now and forever finished.

THE SEVENTH WORD - the supreme surrender expressed by a faithful Son soon to be embraced by his father in their heavenly home.

Six great theological masterpieces. And now we're confronted by this almost trivial fifth word: I THIRST. How can it possibly fit with the other six? Did John slip up on this one ... recording a saying of Jesus that was merely an aside ... something under his breath ... something never intended for posterity and ever-lasting reflection!?

Let us not be too hasty in dismissing the insignificance of Jesus' thirst ... his earthly cry of human need. For in the first place - that's exactly what this word graphically conveys to us ... A VERY HUMAN, A VERY REAL, A VERY DOWN-TO-EARTH JESUS.

No other word tells us so graphically how much Jesus was just like you and me in the hour of suffering. This word confirms that there was a MAN on the cross ... not a god in disguise, not a phantom of divinity, not an unreal half-God, half-man -- but a real man ... suffering, bleeding, and in his dying moments ... THIRSTING ... DYING TO HAVE HIS AGONIZING THIRST QUENCHED. Any of us who have ever cared for a dying loved one know the human reality of that thirst in the hour of suffering unto death.

Here was the Son of God who was truly a man from birth to death -- but a man from beginning to end who was truly obedient to God his father. Here was a man on the cross who would not be tempted to use any supernatural tricks up his tunic; there was no halo of holiness protecting this man from the reality of human thirst in the throes of death. Here was a true man of God who would not appeal to angels or other supernatural powers for release from the reality of a tragic death. Here was God's obedient man -- humanly obedient unto death! Is it any wonder this man has forever been confessed our Lord and Savior?!?

Yes, here is God's Son who fully identifies and confesses his human need. Just like you and me, when he is whipped, he thirsts. He cries for real water because he has a real human thirst.

But we get here more than a word of basic human need. We also have here a word of basic human humiliation and helplessness. God's only son admits that he has been humiliated into helplessness -- he needs someone to give him a drink.

What a powerful reality for us to comprehend about our Lord Jesus -- that he knew the humiliation of being helpless. Here was the Lord who could accomplish the redemptive work of the cross by himself. Here was God's Son who had the strength to endure the suffering of the cross. Here was the Miracle Worker who had changed water into wine at Cana. But here was that same Lord who was now helpless to give himself a drink! What humiliation in this word! What helplessness we hear as Christ cries out. "I thirst!"

In light of our Lord's example - dare we ever feel too proud or too embarrassed to cry out for help when we are in need. Dare we ever look in disgust at others who are crying out to us in humiliating helplessness? Do we not see that our Lord is teaching us not to hide from our real human hurts and thirsts; not to think that we are above humiliation and helplessness?

After my open-heart surgery some six months ago -- I hope I have better learned compassion when hearing the cry of human helplessness. For when we are thrust into the hour of death ... we cannot avoid the reality of helplessness. So if Jesus Christ can beg for a drink from his enemies, then certainly we should never feel ashamed to plead for support from God's friends. This fifth word not only teaches us there is nothing unfaithful in being helpless ... but it also teaches that faithfulness means pleading for help ... and offering help to those who are pleading.

Which brings us to the most profound application of this 5th word: WHEN JESUS SAYS, "I THIRST," HE IS IDENTIFYING HIMSELF NOT ONLY WITH OUR TOTAL SELF ... BUT WITH OUR TOTAL WORLD AS WELL. The thirst of the cross is not merely a

spiritual or religious need -- the thirst of the cross is a social, political, and economic need as well. For when Jesus Christ cries out "I thirst," he identifies himself with every cry of need that comes forth from a suffering humanity.

Here is the great theological insight of this 5th word. It is not merely a spiritual or devotional word for Good Friday; it is God's word of mission for his church every day of the year. Much as Christ called for his physical thirst to be satisfied, he continues to call for his body, the church, to satisfy that ongoing cries for thirst in this world.

Have you and I heard the cries of inadequate housing from the homeless, of insufficient food and clothing from the poor, of deficient medical care from the uninsured, of mediocre education from minorities? These are the cries of Jesus Christ: "I Thirst!" Have you and I heard the cries of child abuse, and drug abuse, and elderly abuse, and sex abuse, and political abuse?? Christ is crying through these abused people: "I thirst!" "I'm humiliated - help me!" In every arena of life where people are hurting, helpless, and hopeless ... the Christ of the cross is there crying: "I thirst."

With this word, Jesus Christ signs the mark of the cross on every person ... for each of us at one time will be dying of thirst. With this word, human need can no longer be seen as merely a political or social problem -- this word makes all need a religious problem. With this word, no longer can Christians idly stand-by excusing themselves from involvement in human thirst "because we are only concerned with spiritual matters" -- human thirst is graphically a SPIRITUAL MATTER!! With this word, the Christian church has received its marching orders direct from her Lord: SATISFY HUMAN HUNGER AND THIRST WHEREVER YOU HEAR ITS CRY!!

As you can see - this word may not have the theological weight of the other six -- but human thirst according to Jesus Christ is no small matter. His thirst was real! He cried for satisfaction! And his cry has never stopped!

Since he has satisfied my thirst and your thirst on the cross of salvation -- he now calls us to show some tangible thanksgiving ... some real human gratitude - by satisfying the human cries of the thirsty wherever they are heard. For wherever there is human thirst, there is a person who is being humiliated by the cross. Let it never be said that this body of Christ was no better than a squadron of jeering soldiers at the foot of the cross. God has shown us a better way than vinegar on hyssop. For every time we give a cup of cool water to a THIRSTY NOBODY -- we quench the THIRST of Christ!! AMEN.

JOSEPH CAIAPHAS, THE HIGH PRIEST
Good Friday - March 29, 1991
Hope Lutheran Church - Tenebrae Worship - 7:30 p.m.
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

As a child, I Joseph Caiaphas, was reared in the best of family traditions - when religious training was still emphasized by parents. IN MY TEENS, I was genuinely interested in religion. But as I entered the priesthood to make religion my life's work, I became utterly UNSPIRITUAL. Of course, I did not admit my faithlessness at that time - to be a genuine hypocrite you must at least play the part of sincerity.

As you all know - the man occupying the office of high priest was to be a man of impeccable character. And of course, the office usually made him an even better man. But not so for me. As high priest, I lived a low life and shamefully abused my responsibilities. Like many of your leaders today - I merely used the office to fulfill my own selfish desires.

Of course, you know that I was a Sadducee. We were the rationalists - the intellectuals of our day.. Dogmatically following Aristotealan principles - all doctrine had to go through the wringer of reason. We squeezed out everything unacceptable to our rational philosophy. You can imagine what was left. The Bible tells you we taught "there is no resurrection or spirit." That's only a half-truth. We also denied the providence of God - insisting that all circumstances of life resulted from pure blind chance. Needless to say, we were not waiting for any Savior - we believed we did not need one.

You may be wondering - Why would a Sadducee aspire to the office of high priest? You should surely know the answer to that. For one reason ... and one reason only: FOR WHAT I COULD GET OUT OF IT! The office of high priest gave me great power. It was a position of great political intrigue. People saw our corruption, but no one disturbed us. I pulled wires, I slipped bribes, I practiced blackmail in a manner for more gross than your worst politicians. Yet my influence remained unshaken.

The office of high priest brought me great wealth. Your modern "abscams" and "junk bonds" are nothing compared to what we religious leaders accomplished. You see - we controlled the pricing and sale of animals used for sacrifices. You might say we were like the oil cartel of the first century. We became rich as we bled everyone else poor.

Hopefully you now see that our interest in religion was purely for its form and control. Religion for us was a mere external thing - a system to manipulate for our own selfish purposes. Religion for us had no internal anchor of faith, hope or love.

Of course, you have similar circumstances today. Your churches are yet full of people like me. For many of your people, religion is just an outward observance - a show of piety for the sake of looking good for others. For many of these people, the flag means more than their faith. It's little more than civil righteousness. For such people, the church's mission is viewed no differently than any other social club - discipleship is equated with simply paying your annual membership fee.

But enough of this polemic. Suffice it to say that it was my responsibility to announce the arrival of the Messiah - for whom the Pharisees were waiting. But when this Jesus came, he did not fit into our religion at all. What he stood for did not harmonize with what we expected God TO SAY OR TO DO.

As I said before, religion for us was much like religion for many in your culture. We wanted a religion and a Savior that fit into our life JUST AS IT WAS. We wanted a religion that demanded no changes -- that demanded no commitments -- and that did not forbid us from doing what we wanted to do.

Obviously - we wanted a religion without any convictions or sacrifices. As you well know - that is not Christianity! Christianity changes lives. Christianity seeks to serve, rather than be served. Christianity does not conform to "secular standards," but rather transforms them.

Needless to say, the arrival of your Messiah - your Christ - was not great cause for celebration among us. You may think our hatred of him began during what you call Holy Week. That was hardly the case. We had observed him with disgust for almost three years. I had wanted to put him out of the way for a long time. But he had developed what you call A FOLLOWING. Getting at him was like trying to assassinate one of your presidents. Even if we had succeeded, we would have been destroyed by the mob.

And of course, the problem got even worse. He began to publicly denounce and scorn us. And his miracles were causing larger and larger crowds to follow him. We infiltrated the multitudes with our own spies. They constantly came back with glowing reports of his successes -- very discouraging for us.

Occasionally, our scouts were prompted to ask him questions with the hope of incriminating him. But his insight and indisputable logic always made us look a poor second best. +++ His nobility of character emphasized our depravity. +++ His popularity forcefully reminded us of our disdain. +++ His love for all peoples, regardless of their circumstances, called attention to our contempt for anyone who was not of our party or persuasion. Thus, it was evident: WE COULD NOT CO-EXIST IN THE SAME TEMPLE - NOT EVEN IN THE SAME COUNTRY.

And then came what you call Palm Sunday. What a disgusting parade as the multitude mobbed him and acclaimed him Lord of Lords ... and King of Kings. All those Hosanas truly clinched it: WE HAD TO ACT FAST AND RUTHLESSLY.

On Monday, he cleansed the temple again, as he had done three years earlier. This time he called our temple a den of thieves. It almost seemed like he was trying to force us to act quickly. And then the man, Judas, came in with the offer to betray him. It couldn't have been timed better. We figured if one of his very own disciples was not afraid to oppose him - then why should we hesitate?? And so, we closed the death contract - for thirty pieces of silver.

Of course, you all remember that night when he was brought to the palace. Did you ever realize we were not ready for him?!? The sentence had been passed: "He must die," but we had not yet found a reason for putting him to death. We had the punishment, but not the crime.

Again, do not be too harsh upon us. There are groups in your culture today who act much the same way - the Klan, the Birch Society, the neo-Nazis, and other right or left wing hate groups. All these are quick to condemn before they have any proof or evidence for their judgments.

Yes, one of your writers found 43 "direct and specific violations of civil law" in our arrest, trial, & execution of the Christ. I'm sure he was accurate. In fact, we failed miserably in our opening arguments. Our witnesses were deliberately perjuring themselves. None of them could agree; they testimonies lacked any semblance of the truth.

In sheer exasperation, I finally stepped forward to this Christ putting him under the most solemn oath: "I adjure you by the living God that you tell us whether you are the Christ, the Son of the living God!?!"

There was absolute silence. Finally he answered. It was what I had been waiting for ... and yet I trembled. He responded: "Just as you have said."

The entire Council should have arisen and shouted on his behalf: "AMEN! AMEN!" But instead there was silence. So I broke the silence with a disgusting act: Tearing my clothes in mock sorrow, I cried: "He has spoken blasphemy; what further need we for witnesses?!? You have heard it with your own ears! What think you?!?" Now those same people who had silently denied him just moments before, rose to their feet and joined their voices shouting: "He is guilty of death!"

All night we treated him shamefully. The next day I delivered him to Pontius Pilate, and the Romans carried out the death sentence. At last we thought we were rid of him. But then two days later ... he was again with us ... and then we knew we'd never be rid of him.

And you know the rest of the story better than me. We put our trust in our own human power, manipulation, and greed. And we lost.

God proved again there was and still is only one everlasting power that rules victoriously -- his love through Jesus Christ, the Messiah. He offers you that power of love each and every time you gather in this place. Don't leave here without it!

GOOD FRIDAY - DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE
"J o s e p h o f A r i m a t h e a"
April 17, 1992
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

How could this happen? Just yesterday I heard Jesus teaching in the temple. His words held me ... challenged me ... tore my life apart and put it back as it should have been ... totally lifted my spirit. Today, he is dying on this terrible cross. I knew the chief priests were plotting to arrest him. But they were afraid to touch him -- they knew he had the support of the crowds. How has this changed so dramatically over night?!?

I see Nicodemus over there. I know he thinks as I do. Nicodemus! Nicodemus! What has happened?!? You say one of his own men betrayed him. That he was arrested last night. That the council held a trial -- at night?!? And they condemned him for blasphemy. This man who truly loved God was condemned FOR BLASPHEMY! But a meeting at night - that is totally illegal. And why wasn't I called? They know my house in the village!! ... They didn't call you either?!? Did they suspect that we both would have defended him?? Well there can be no doubt about it -- the council has acted behind our backs ... and we're far too late to stop this dreadful crime. Crime - yes crime - the Council is guilty of a crime ... and so are the Romans ... and so is the mob ... and so are we.

Why didn't we speak out for Jesus in the council -- weeks ago -- months ago, as you once defended him, Nicodemus. Jesus had made it so clear to me, when we talked -- he didn't force me, but he made it so clear to me. He said, "Joseph, someday you must either claim me in public, or deny me." But I wouldn't risk my reputation, my position on the Sanhedrin, my status as a religious authority -- so I held my tongue. And now I know the meaning of guilt caused by silence and self-protection.

Wait. Listen to what he's saying. "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." He calls God his Father. No one has ever called God "Father" in such a close and personal way. His voice is strong - not timid and trembling - not weak with fear and resignation - but strong and confident. He willingly hands over his spirit to his Father. He's been handed over by Judas ... handed over by the chief priests, by Pilate, by Herod, by the mob, by his own disciples ... and yet now he hands himself over - in perfect trust - to his Father's hands. Now he says "into your hands I commit my

spirit." Of course, he always was in God's hands. But now he's going home -- he's accepting the peace & security that surpasses all human understanding in this world. That's why he speaks with such confidence ... with even a sound of triumph: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." He has but one Father, and he is now in his Father's care.

But Nicodemus, you and I are fathers. Not only of families - we are fathers in Israel, members of the council. He commits his spirit to his Father in Heaven. What does he commit to us? No one else is here - does this mean that he has committed his body into our hands?? Surely we cannot leave him here, hanging with thieves and murderers. It's a disgrace in Israel for a man to go unburied -- and a double disgrace for a man of God not to have a proper burial. We're not part of his inner circle ... his most trusted ... so it would be so easy to just leave him ... let them try to get him later. But they cannot go to the governor to ask for his body, and certainly they have no place to bury him.

That must be it -- that must be the calling that God has given to me. I will take his body in my hands -- take him down from the tree, carry him to the tomb, and with my own hands spread the spices and wrap him in linen. Pilate knows me; I can ask him for Jesus' body. I have a new tomb, chiseled in the cliff. My servants can carry him there ... and there we can fix the spices and offer a proper burial.

Yes, Nicodemus, you are right; it will take great courage. We'll meet resentment from Pilate ... maybe even ridicule and rejection. We'll certainly face hostility from the chief priests. The cost will be high -- it will cost us prestige, influence, status among our own people -- we may even lose our positions on the Council ... maybe even our property, possibly even our lives.

But that can only be the start. This must change my life - no, I must change my life. No, that's not it -- he is the One who has changed my life. He has already changed my life - for there was only emptiness and bitterness in my heart, and now the love of God in this Messiah has made my spirit merciful, caring, compassionate -- whole.

But when my hands have laid his body in the tomb - then what shall I do with these hands?? If his body is committed to my hands, then surely my hands must become his hands -- HIS HANDS TO CONTINUE HIS WORK IN THIS WORLD ... MY LIPS MUST BECOME HIS LIPS TO SPEAK HIS WORD IN THIS WORLD ... MY FEET MUST BECOME HIS FEET TO GO WHERE HE WOULD GO IN THIS WORLD.

Nicodemus, I can't forget what you told me of that conversation with Him that night ... when you went to him and he said: "Nicodemus, you must be born again." Now I know what he meant by that. It is what I have been desiring for a long time -- to be born again -- my spirit to be born of his spirit ... my life to be born of his life ... my vision to be born of his vision ... my life to be held by his life ... to be held in his hands ... to learn to walk, with my hand holding his, my spirit to grow with his hand upon me - coaxing me, reassuring me, urging me onward, with his hands always there to guide mine. As his hands have built things in a carpenter's shop - now may his hands in spirit guide mine to build my life around his ... and to build others in his image ... his love to work through me ... his hands to shape me that my hands might shape others to be like him.

Then how shall we live with this new life? Jesus asked: "What good have we done not only for those who have loved us, but for those who have hated us? More to the point -- what good shall we do today or tomorrow for those who have already injured us ... WHO DESPARATELY NEED TO BE BORN AGAIN OF LOVE AND FORGIVENESS. Jesus taught us to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. How can we do that - person to person? And maybe even more important - how can we change those powers of society that perpetrate hunger and poverty?"

We've seen Jesus hand himself over to his Father. How shall we hand over to God ... our marriages? our children? Our friends who are in trouble? Our society possessed by possessions? How shall our hands treat the stranger who comes into this place to be welcomed and befriended? How shall we be the hands of God - the hands of our Messiah -- to the homeless, to the homebound, to the grief-stricken, to the guilt-ridden ... to a whole nation and world that lives for war and for the threats of more wars??

Father - Father of the Messiah Jesus, Our Father who art In Heaven ...

into your hands we commit our spirits ...

into your hands we commit our bodies ...

into your hands we place our lives - mind, body, soul, and spirit ... all that we have is yours alone, a trust, O Father, from thee. Use our lives to praise and glorify your life, for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. AMEN.

GOOD FRIDAY: "THE CRY OF THRIST!"

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

April 1, 1994

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"After this, Jesus knowing that all was now finished, said, "I thirst." John 19:28

Good Friday preaching has taken a dramatic shift from the days of three-hour services with the "Seven Last Words of Jesus" from the cross. Since these last words come from different gospel writers out of different contexts, modern homiletics & theology considers it "inappropriate" for such words to be blended as if they were "chronologically rendered from Jesus on the cross." But being a little old fashioned myself and still loving these "last words," I am deeply thankful that the appointed text from John today includes three of these classics.

I especially want to focus upon what has been traditionally called the fifth word, "I thirst." Prof. Richard Hoefler from Southern Seminary says that this word causes us to be "shockingly jolted" in light of the other sayings of Jesus on Good Friday. The other words traditionally attributed to Jesus reflect heights of theological mystery, significance and integrity.

THE FIRST WORD FROM LUKE - an unforgettable formula of forgiveness ... the true jewel of divine grace.

THE SECOND WORD FROM LUKE rings with decisive yet merciful judgment: the pronouncement of peace & paradise to a penitent thief.

THE THIRD WORD FROM JOHN, OUR TEXT TODAY - a reflection of our Lord's nobility of compassion for his beloved friend & bereaving mother.

THE FOURTH WORD FROM MATTHEW & MARK - the universal confession of separation experienced by every son/daughter of God confronted by the lonely isolation of death.

THE SIXTH FROM JOHN, AGAIN TODAY'S TODAY--the kairos, the completeness, the fulfillment of mission finally realized; the task of salvation now and forever finished.

AND THE SEVENTH WORD FROM LUKE - the supreme surrender expressed by an obedient Son soon to be in the embrace of his Father in their everlasting home.

Six great theological masterpieces. And then we are confronted by an almost trivial word: "I thirst." Even though we're not listening to the seven last words today--this word just doesn't seem to fit the drama of Good Friday. Did John slip up here? Was this just an aside of Jesus, not to be heard for all posterity?

Quite to the contrary - in these two little words we see the VERY HUMAN, VERY REAL, VERY DOWN-TO-EARTH CHARACTER of Jesus that can be totally overlooked in all the other "words" of this day. No other word tells us so graphically how much Jesus was just like you and me in the hour of suffering. This word confirms that there was a MAN on that cross: NOT a god in disguise; NOT a phantom of

of divinity; NOT an unreal half-God, half-man -- but a real man ... suffering, bleeding, hurting and crying in his dying moments. In fact, DYING TO HAVE HIS THIRST QUENCHED! Any one of us who has ever cared for dying loved ones knows the human reality of such thirst in the hour of death.

Here was the Son of God who was not only fully a man from birth to death, but a man from beginning to end who was obedient to His Father. Here was a man on the cross who would not be tempted to use any supernatural tricks to escape suffering; here was a man who had no halo of holiness to protect him from human thirst in the throes of death. Here was a man who would not appeal to the angelic hosts for release from the reality of premature death. Just like you and me, when he was whipped, he was thirsty! He cried for real water because he was suffering real human thirst.

But we get more here than a Good Friday expression of basic human need. We also have here a Good Friday lesson on human humiliation and helplessness. God's only son admits that he has been humiliated into helplessness: he needs someone to give him a drink.

What a powerful reality for us to comprehend about our Lord: that he knew the humiliation of being helpless. Here was the Lord who could accomplish the redemptive work of the cross by himself. Here was God's Son who had the strength to endure the suffering of the cross. Here was the Miracle Worker who changed water into wine. Yet here was the same Lord who was so helpless he had to ask for a drink. What humiliation in "I thirst!" What helplessness in the cry: "I thirst!"

In light of our Lord's example: dare we ever feel too proud or too embarrassed to cry out for help when we are in need. Dare we ever look in disgust at someone else who is crying out in humiliating helplessness? DO WE GET IT?: our Lord is teaching us not to hide from our real human hurts and thirsts? He is teaching us to be strong enough to admit our own thirst ... our own helplessness. Or stated another way: if Jesus Christ can beg for help from his enemies, then certainly we should never feel ashamed to plead for support from God's friends in church. "I Thirst" teaches us there is nothing unfaithful in being helpless. But it also teaches that faithfulness means pleading for help: and offering help to those who are pleading.

And that brings us to the most profound application of this so-called "trivial" word from the cross. When Jesus says, "I Thirst," HE IS IDENTIFYING HIMSELF NOT ONLY WITH WE FAITHFUL WHO GATHER IN CHURCH, BUT WITH ALL THE HELPLESS IN THE WORLD. The thirst of the cross is not merely a

spiritual or religious need -- the thirst of the cross is a social, political and economic need as well. For when Jesus Christ cries out "I thirst," he identifies himself with every cry of human suffering & need in the whole world.

Here is the great theological significance of this trivial word. "I thirst" is not merely a spiritual or devotional word for Good Friday; it is God's word of mission for his church every day of the year. God continues TO THIRST for his body, the church, to satisfy the ongoing cries "of thirst" heard all over the world.

Have you and I heard the cries of inadequate housing or insufficient food from the poor? How have we responded to those cries? Have we just denounced politicians for being too charitable, or have we tried to get involved in personally responding to the cry? How about medical care for the uninsured or improved education for the marginalized? These are the cries of Christ saying "I thirst! I need help! Give me a drink from your abundant rivers of life!" Have you heard any cries of child abuse, or drug abuse, or elderly abuse, or sex abuse, or abuse of authority? Christ is crying through these abused people, "I thirst for help! I'm humiliated, help me!" Maybe you and I cannot offer direct help to some of these people, but we can at least be compassionate rather than like belligerent soldiers offering vinegar with hyssop.

With "I thirst," Jesus Christ signs the mark of the cross on every person: for each of us at one time will be dying of thirst. "I thirst" takes Good Friday out of the religious realm and drives it into the social, political and economic realms of life: no longer can faithful Christians merely "stand-by" excusing themselves from involvement in matters of "human thirst" because they are not spiritual matters. Today Jesus graphically clarifies for every Christian that "human thirst/human need" is a SPIRITUAL MATTER. TODAY, THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH GETS VERY CLEAR MARCHING ORDERS FROM HER LORD: SATISFY HUMAN HUNGER AND THIRST WHEREVER YOU HEAR ITS CRY!!

As we can see - "I thirst" may not have the theological weight of other words associated with Good Friday, but human thirst according to Jesus Christ is no small matter. His thirst was real! He cried for satisfaction! And his cry has never stopped! And since he has satisfied my thirst and your thirst on the cross of salvation ... he now calls us to show signs of tangible thanksgiving: TO SATISFY THE CRIES OF THE THIRSTY IN WHATEVER WAY WE CAN WHEREVER THEY ARE HEARD! Let it never be said that the body of Christ is no better than a squadron of jeering soldiers at the foot of the cross. God has shown us a better way than vinegar on hyssop. For every time we give a cup of cold water to a THIRSTY UNKNOWN (AS WE DO THRU OUR GOOD FRIDAY & EASTER OFFERING TO LUTH WORLD RELIEF) -- WE ARE QUENCHING THE THIRST OF CHRIST! THANKS BE TO GOD THAT YOU ARE SATISFYING THE THIRST OF CHRIST THIS GOOD FRIDAY. AMEN.

*GOOD FRIDAY - Noon & Tenebrae
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
March 28, 1997 - 12 Noon and 7:00 p.m.
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor*

“Better Than ALMOST Good Friday!”

A third time Pilate said, “I have found in him no crime deserving death; I will therefore chastise him and release him.” But they were urgent, demanding with loud cries that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed. So Pilate gave the sentence that their demand should be granted. Luke 23:22-24

Based upon a piece by Max Lucado, tonite we simply ponder one word: “ALMOST!” In any person’s dictionary, “almost” is a sad word. It runs the race with “Nearly,” “Next time,” “If only.” and “Just about!” It’s a word that smacks of missed opportunities and fumbled chances. “I almost got it” -- “that just got away;” “the sale nearly closed;” “the cookies are a little burned; Lauren Becall came close to winning an Oscar!” How many people do we know who’s claim to fame is “ALMOST?!”

As long as there have been people on earth, there have been “almosts.” Adam and Eve were “almost” obedient unto God. Most nations except the middle East have “almost” stopped fighting. “Almost all of us here tonite almost made it through this day without being almost upset with someone!”

One of the most famous ALMOSTS is found in the Bible: Pontius Pilate. Yet, what he missed was far more significant than an Oscar. He “almost” performed what would have been history’s greatest act of mercy. He “almost” pardoned the Prince of Peace ... “almost” released the Son of God. Pilate almost opted to “acquit the Christ!” ALMOST!! He had the power and he had the choice! The option to have mercy on God’s Son was his ... and he almost did it!

“ALMOST!” How many times do these six ugly letters find their way into our lives, our work, even our epitaphs?? “He ‘almost’ got it together!” “She ‘almost’ stayed with him!” “We ‘almost’ worked it out!” “Our children ‘almost’ became Christians before that Hall-Bopp cult!” Why with humanity is there such a WIDE GAP between “she almost did it” and “she did it!” In the case of Pilate, we need look no further than our text: *“A third time he said to them, ‘why, what evil has he done? I have found in him no crime deserving death; I will therefore chastise him and release him.’” But they were urgent - demanding with loud voices that he should be crucified. And their voices prevailed!! Let me say it again: “their voices prevailed.”* How often do their voices prevail and cause us to do what we never intended to do?? As a result of “their voices,” Pilate’s fear prevailed!! (Pressure of their voices)

Yet, let’s be fully honest: “their voices” were not the only voices Pilate heard. [1] First, he heard the voice of Jesus. The two of them stood eye to eye ... and Jesus never refuted Pilate, only confirmed what he said each time. Pilate had at least three opportunities to hear Jesus. Each time he postponed his

decision ... trying to gratify the mob with lashings. [2] Secondly, Pilate could have listened to his wife. She sent him a note saying "have nothing to do with that innocent man for I have suffered much over him in a dream." [3] Thirdly, he could have listened to his own inner voice. Surely his conscience was speaking to him. That's why he kept on delaying ... he kept saying: "I find nothing wrong with this man!" He could have heard these voices, but he didn't. He listened to them - "almost!!"

Dear Glenwood friends, tonite we must reflect upon how often our own lives have become like Pilate's. In what arenas of life has "almost" become acceptable?? Certainly not in most of our jobs! I know of very few people who go to their bosses and are rewarded for "almost" doing the job!! Certainly not with our kids. We constantly give more than "almost" to our children!! Not even with most of our civic and national leaders: in fact today, the media has been unrelenting with any political figure who "almost" messes up!! We cut very little slack in almost all arenas of life. But somehow today, "ALMOST" has become a fashionable mentality in the church!! Dear Christian friends - where in the Bible does God say that he wants us to be "almost faithful" or "almost committed" or "almost at worship each Sabbath?" How can the church survive in an age where "almost is considered enough for Jesus Christ?" Certainly there's grace and mercy in the life of our church -- but does that mean that obedience to God requires "almost" living according to his will?

Good Friday graphically reminds us that Jesus did not "almost" die on the cross: he fully suffered; he fully died; he fully finished the ugly task of redeeming humanity. He made graphically clear that EVEN THOUGH WE have denied and betrayed him for centuries, he would not deny and betray us!! Just imagine if God had allowed Jesus to "almost" die! *"I believe in Jesus Christ, who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary; he suffered under Pontius Pilate and was "almost" crucified, "almost" died, and "almost" buried!* What does an "almost" crucified Jesus Christ do for our faith?? An "almost" crucified Christ means there is no salvation ... there is no lasting forgiveness ... there is no love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things!! *An "almost" crucified Lord means that we are all on our own!!* And we all know what our future will be if we are counting on our own righteousness to save us or anyone else in this world!!

We are here tonite in order to praise & thank God that he is not an "almost" God. When he makes up his mind to save the world, he allows his only begotten Son to die for us in order that nobody need suffer condemnation!! Likewise, I give thanks that all of you came tonight rather than "almost" coming. Because without Good Friday -- it is "almost" impossible to appreciate Easter Sunday. In fact, without Good Friday, it is impossible to have an Easter Sunday!!

I hope like me - you are glad that it is NOT "ALMOST" Good Friday. Because after tonight - there can be no doubt in anyone's mind about Jesus: he

did not come into this world to "almost" suffer for us. He fully drank the cup of suffering; he totally fulfilled the will of his Father; he completely sacrificed himself to prove that God goes all the way -- God is not "almost" faithful to us!!

And that's why we call this night Good Friday! Because it is good to be redeemed, good to be fully loved, good to be fully forgiven & good to be reconciled to the God and Father of all creation!! Yes -- tonite is so much BETTER THAN "ALMOST" GOOD FRIDAY!! For those of us who have gathered for Good Friday - Easter will always be more than bunnies or trivial signs of spring. For Easter cannot be Easter -- there can never be "shouts" that "He is risen!" if there have not first been cries to "Crucify Him!" If those cries had only "almost" been carried out -- there would be no Easter Sunday!

Thanks be to God in Jesus Christ who is so much more than "almost" our Lord and Savior!!

AMEN.