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## The Seventh Word from the Cross

*"Into Your Hands"* – Luke 23:44-49

A Maundy Thursday Meditation

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Northway Christian Church, Dallas, Texas

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One of the great theologians (Schleiermacher) I read in Seminary believed that true religion does not consist of the forms of faith but of feelings. He was a product of the spiritual tradition that had always made a careful distinction between the kernel and the shell of spiritual things. And so he believed that the church has its doctrines, but there's a reality behind every one of them that's so much bigger and more important than our clumsy words can describe. And the church has its rituals, but every form of worship and every act of the devotion is just a channel of the heart's disposition. And the church has its structures, but they are only the outer containers of the inner life of the Spirit.

Understanding all of this, he sought a definition of religion that would help to keep the focus on the right things. As Calvin Miller puts it –

*At a strikingly early age I learned that life in Christ is so inward that it cannot be externalized completely. The historical facts surrounding Christ are clear. Certainly the theological truths are sure. But the reality of Jesus is always a matter of the heart. (12)*

And it's when we forget this that we get into trouble every time. We had a name for it in the spiritual tradition of my childhood and youth. It was called the sin of "*sentimentality*" – being content with correct doctrines and precise liturgies without the full engagement of the heart.

And so that theologian I read in Seminary defined true religion as "*the feeling of absolute dependence.*" It's what you feel when you stand under the canopy of space on a clear night far from the reflection of the big city lights. It's what you feel when you stand at the hospital bedside or graveside of a loved one. It's what you feel when listening to a piece of music or looking at a piece of art that transports you to another place. It's what you feel when you hold in your arms your parents, your siblings, your spouse, and your kids. This feeling of absolute dependence is the realization that there is something or someone far bigger than us in this universe and that we don't control everything that happens. The most we can do is to put ourselves into the hands of that something or someone, and then trust that we will finally be provided for and taken care of somehow.

It's Holy Week, in fact, this service here tonight begins what the church calls the "*Triduum*," the three "*great days*" of Christianity – Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday that deliver us to Easter Sunday. What we will mark between now and Sunday in worship are the very events of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – the Upper Room, the Garden of Gethsemane, Calvary and the Garden Tomb. Tonight in this service we will follow Jesus Christ through these events using Scripture, art and music. But if any of this is really to mean anything to us, then its got to become more than just a recollection of history.

I would never downplay the importance of this history. I believe that the things we'll be talking about over the next few days really happened. It's just that if it's to mean something to us, then it's got to be more than just history to us. Knowing that Christ died on Calvary is interesting I suppose, but knowing that He died for you and for me is important. And so we've got to engage more than just our heads on this journey to the cross we begin tonight; we've got to get our hearts fully involved too. And this is where the seventh word from the cross comes into play.

We've been systematically working our way through the seven things that the four Gospels tell us Christ said from the cross as He was dying. Each week for the past six Sundays we've affixed a different word to the cross –

- *Father, Forgiven them for they know not what they do.*
  - *Today you will be with me in paradise.*
  - *Behold your son... behold your mother*
- *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*
  - *I Thirst.*
  - *It is finished*

And that brings us tonight to the last word spoken from the cross, "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.*" If, as some suggest, that these words that Christ spoke from the cross provide us with Christ's own understanding of the significance of what was happening to Him, then this last word that Christ spoke before He died has special significance.

Now I've never been able to personally verify it, but somewhere along the way I was told that Christ's seventh and last word from the cross, "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit,*" was a petition drawn from Psalm 31:5. That phrase "*into your hand I commit my spirit,*" in Psalm 31 is the conclusion to a prayer for protection and provision to the God who is called our "*rock of refuge and strong fortress.*" It is a prayer of dependence and trust. And I've been told that it was the bedtime prayer that Jewish parents taught their children to pray right before they closed their eyes in sleep each night, the biblical equivalent to our "*now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.*" And if that's so, then what an amazing expression from the cross it is.

The last thing that Jesus said before He died might very well have been some words from a prayer that He had been taught when He was just a little boy. No great theological oration; no pithy, trenchant public comment; no

famous last word distilling the wisdom He had systematically imparted; just a child's prayer of absolute dependence and trust. And maybe, just maybe, that was the true essence of His teachings. Charles de Foucauld thought it was.

Charles was the founder of the Little Brothers of Jesus, an order of Christians who resolve to live their Christianity side by side with ordinary people in routine situations. Renting apartments in groups of three and four, these Little Brothers of Jesus go to where people are and they live as their neighbors, sharing their joys and struggles. They take menial jobs at minimum wage where they can be with their friends as they slave and sweat, and then when their shifts are over, they go home and pray for the names and needs of those they've come to know and love. And at the center of the spirituality of the Little Brothers of Jesus is what Charles called the "*Prayer of Abandonment*."

*Father, I abandon myself into your hands;  
do with me what you will.*

*Whatever you may do, I thank you:  
I am ready for all, I accept all.*

*Let only your will be done in me,  
and in all your creatures -  
I wish no more than this, O Lord.*

*Into your hands I commend my soul:  
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart,  
for I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself,  
to surrender myself into your hands without reserve,  
and with boundless confidence,  
for you are my Father.*

For the Little Brothers of Jesus, this prayer based on Christ's seventh word from the cross, is the essence of the Christian life. And so they pray it every single day during a morning communion service. In fact, the Little Brothers of Jesus will tell you that this prayer of abandonment is preeminently a communion prayer because its origins are Jesus Christ on the cross, and because it is an expression of our absolute dependence, thanksgiving and trust.

In just a moment now, we are going to break the bread, bless the cup, remember Christ's sacrifice and invite Christ's presence. And when we're done, we're going to journey from the Upper Room where the Lord's Supper was instituted to the cross where Christ died. And the last thing that Jesus Christ said from that cross needs to be the first thing that we pray every day as Christians, and every time we come to this table – "*Father, I abandon myself into your hands*." It's this kind of dependence and trust that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is finally all about.

**Sources**

Livingston, James C. Modern Christian Thought. Chapter 4: "Christainity and Romanticism" (Schleirrmacher). MacMillan Publishers. 1971.

Miller, Calvin. The Table of Inwardness. IVP. 1984.

Charles de Foucauld – [www.jesusclairtas.info](http://www.jesusclairtas.info)