

SERMON TITLE: The Seven Last Words of Christ: #6—"It is finished"
SERMON TEXT: John 19:25b-30
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 2, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

For a year and a half, my mom has been waiting for a certain apartment complex to have an opening. The plan has been that she would move out of the house and large property where she and my dad lived for over 50 years. Since Dad passed away in 2015, there's been way too much work for Mom to do alone. So, she needs to move into something smaller and more manageable. The good news is that an opening in that apartment complex is coming soon. On May 1st, Mom will be able to start moving into that new, simpler lifestyle. Ironically, though, that good news is causing Mom some stress. Even though she's been unwavering in her anticipation of this move for 19 months, all of a sudden, there are so many decisions to make and so much downsizing to do. But, whether she's ready or not, May 1st will be here in just four weeks. In order for a new chapter of life to begin, she must bring this current one to a close.

Whether moving, graduating from school, or retiring from work, at some point or another, we all come to the end of a line or phase of life. The same was true for Jesus. As he hung on the cross, his strength gone, and his breath fading away, Jesus recognized he had come to his final moments. Because the four gospels remember Jesus' last words differently, it's hard to know exactly in what order Jesus might have said his final statements. But, today, in John's gospel, we read that Jesus died very soon after he said, "It is finished."

I invite you to consider these words of finality with me this morning. What did it mean for Jesus and what does it mean for us to say, "It is finished"?

1—COMPLETED WORK

Probably the first meaning of this statement is, “I have completed my work.” As Jesus was bowing his head and giving up his spirit, he did so in physical weakness. But he also did so in the spiritual strength of knowing that he had completed the work that God had given him. In his long prayer in John chapter 17, Jesus named off many of the things he had accomplished. In that prayer, Jesus was, in a sense, reporting to God—much as an employee might turn in a report to their boss, or a company might send out an annual report to its stockholders. Jesus could go to his death knowing that he had given his work his best effort. He had pleased God and himself. Jesus could go to the grave with integrity. He had fulfilled his calling.

During the past month, I’ve been reading a biography of Francis Asbury. He was the first bishop elected when the Methodist Episcopal Church was formed in America in 1784. Francis Asbury assigned and encouraged the traveling preachers and worked tirelessly for the spread of the gospel, at great risk to his health and safety. Asbury’s work took him into each of “the 13 original states almost every year,” so that, by the time he was 61 years old and nearing his death, Asbury had “preached 18,000 sermons and traveled enough miles [on horseback] to have circled the globe eleven times.” Francis Asbury made such an impact on early America that an estimated 20 to 25 thousand persons assembled at his funeral. They wanted to honor a man who had given his heart, soul, mind, and strength to finish the work to which God had called him.¹

None of us will ever rise to the level of Jesus, and probably not even to the level of Francis Asbury. But we each have our own calling to fulfill, our own charge to keep, our own assignments to finish, our own potential to realize. When we reach the end of the line, we don’t want to be full of regret about time wasted on unimportant things. When our time is finished, we want to be like Jesus. We want to have peace in our hearts that we have completed our work.

2—TURNED OVER RESPONSIBILITY

Lest we fear that “completing our work” is an impossible task, we need to recognize that a second meaning of “It is finished” is that we have “turned over responsibility.” If we refer again to Jesus’ prayer in John chapter 17, we see that Jesus wasn’t only giving an accountability report to God. Jesus was also turning responsibility back to God. Jesus had done all he could to teach, preach, and demonstrate God’s healing power and loving forgiveness. Now God would have to continue that work among Jesus’ closest disciples, other believers, and those in the world who were yet to believe. Jesus prayed that God would help Jesus’ followers keep their faith and stay unified. Earlier, in John chapter 14, Jesus had told his disciples that he wouldn’t leave them as orphans. When Jesus went away, God’s Holy Spirit would come to guide them and give them peace.

Jesus also turned responsibility over to his disciples. All through his ministry, Jesus had been teaching them to carry on his ministry and training them to spread the gospel. In John 14:12, Jesus said, “Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. You will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father, and I will do whatever you ask in my name.”

Finishing is often complicated by our own feelings of not wanting to let go or sometimes by our fear that there’s no qualified person to step up and take over responsibility. But whether we’re talking about death or the end of a term of service, we need to try to finish our work with grace and a smooth transition. If what we were doing was worth *our* while, then it probably will be worth someone *else’s* while to continue it after we’re done. We all know of transitions that were poorly managed. A grieving spouse who has no idea how to pay bills or cook a meal. Grown children who suddenly have to manage a parent’s estate that they were never previously trusted to know anything about. The new chair of a church committee who got their training by fire, since no one else would do the job. Sometimes those situations can’t be helped. But, whenever possible, we should bring our time of work to a positive finish

by recruiting and training our replacement. Long before it's time for us to say, "It is finished," we should make a plan to turn over responsibility.

3—ACCEPTED DEATH

When Jesus said, "It is finished," he also had a third meaning on his mind. When it's our time, we should accept death. While praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus begged God, if possible, to take this suffering from him. But, as soon as he voiced that prayer, Jesus also conceded, "Yet, not as I will, but as you will." Of highest importance to Jesus was doing God's will—even if it meant he would die. Jesus was no doubt tempted by other options, but, in the end, Jesus chose to accept death.

Of course, we don't want death to come any sooner than necessary. We're like the man named Pete who went to church one Sunday. During the sermon, the preacher asked everyone who wanted to go to heaven to raise their hands. Everyone in the church raised their hand except Pete. So, after church, when the minister was saying good-bye to the people, the preacher asked Pete if he could hang around for a few minutes. The minister wanted to talk with him. Pete obliged, and—after the other people had gone—the preacher said, "Pete, during the worship service I got concerned. When I was preaching and asked everyone who wanted to go to heaven to raise their hands, you were the only one in the whole church who didn't respond. Have you lost your faith? Do you have something you need to tell me? Would you like me to pray with you? How can I help you get back on track spiritually?"

"Oh, Reverend," replied Pete with a chuckle. "We must have misunderstood each other. It isn't that I don't want to go to heaven some day when I die. I thought you were organizing a group to go today!"

No, we sure don't need to jump on any bandwagon like that. Very, very rarely should we be rushing our way toward death. But, after we've lived a long and meaningful life and sickness comes upon us to the extent that our life would be more about artificial quantity than real quality, then I believe we have an option to accept and embrace death—not as an enemy, but as a friend. Maybe I'm

still too young to understand these things. Maybe when I get older I'll change my mind. But with the measure of wisdom I have right now, I can't understand why so many Christians are so afraid of death. Why is it that we go to such great lengths to avoid God's ultimate healing? Why is it that we don't eagerly look forward to the loving and abundant life we'll have with God in eternity? Why is it that we behave like we don't believe that God has something better in store for us? One of the best ways to say, "It is finished," is to live as people who are ready and willing to accept death.

CONCLUSION

Author Max Lucado tells the story of

Derek [Redmond], a twenty-six-year-old Briton, [who] was favored to win the four-hundred-meter race in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. Halfway into his semifinal heat, a fiery pain seared through his right leg. He crumpled to the track with a torn hamstring.

As the medical attendants were approaching, Redmond fought to his feet. "It was animal instinct," he would later say. He set out hopping, pushing away the coaches in a crazed attempt to finish the race.

When he reached the stretch, a big man pushed through the crowd. He was wearing a T-shirt that read, "Have you hugged your child today?" and a hat that challenged, "Just Do It." The man was Jim Redmond, Derek's father.

"You don't have to do this," he told his weeping son.

"Yes, I do," Derek declared.

"Well, then," said Jim, "we're going to finish this together."

And they did. Jim wrapped Derek's arm around his shoulder and helped him hobble to the finish line. Fighting off security men, the son's head sometimes buried in the father's shoulder, they stayed in Derek's lane to the end.

The crowd clapped, then stood, then cheered, and then wept as the father and son finished the race.²

None of us will ever get to the finish line with everything done perfectly. But if we lean on the wisdom and example of Jesus for help, we can certainly feel a sense of peace when we say, "It is finished."

¹While have I have been reading John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists*, these quotations and figures actually come from a filmstrip script by Don Mueller, (Graded Press: Nashville, 1965).

² *He Still Moves Stones* (W Publishing Group, 1993 & 1999), pp. 91ff.