

SERMON SERIES: The Seven Last Words of Christ: #7—"Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."
SERMON TEXT: Luke 23:44-49
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 9, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

A couple days ago, I noticed a Facebook post from one of my older cousins, who lives near Portland, Oregon. There was a picture of Ken with his wife Linda, standing in their home. They were all dressed up, like they were going out to celebrate. And there was a brief note from Ken, saying, "It's hard to believe we've been married 44 years."

Seeing my cousin's Facebook post got me to thinking about the odds of couples reaching their 50th anniversaries. These days, people are living a lot longer, so that's a positive factor. But people get divorced a lot and usually marry later, if at all. So those would be factors against reaching 50 years together. I looked this up on the internet and found a demographer who had crunched some numbers. Using 2015 U.S. statistics about marriage and mortality, he figured that, if two 21-year olds committed themselves to each other in marriage that year, they would have had a 35% chance of surviving to their 50th anniversary.

The marital covenant is one kind of commitment. Our commitment to God is another, and that's what we're talking about today. During this season of Lent, we've been working our way through the Seven Last Words of Christ. Today, we reach the final statement Jesus made while hanging on the cross. Let's take some time this morning to consider what Jesus might have meant when he said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

1—JESUS IS IN CONTROL

Maybe the first piece of wisdom we gain from this statement is that, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus seems to be in control. Even in this most terrible situation, Jesus is and has what psychologists and

spiritual directors call “a non-anxious presence.” Jesus isn’t wavering or waffling. He isn’t uncertain or indecisive. He knows exactly what he’s doing.

Over these weeks of preaching on Jesus’ last words, I’ve been intrigued by the different ways the four gospels present Jesus as he was dying. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus’ only words from the cross were his prayer of anguish: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And, in John, we read Jesus’ concern about his physical discomfort when he said, “I am thirsty.” In contrast, Luke shows Jesus graciously praying to God to forgive those who crucified him, kindly offering salvation to the thief on the cross beside him, and now, conscientiously turning his life (and death) over to God in this prayer of commitment. In Luke, Jesus doesn’t seem worried or distracted by his physical pain or his emotional trauma. You get the feeling that Jesus is confidently doing exactly what he wants to be doing. Jesus is no one’s victim. No one else is calling the shots. Even at his last dying breath, Jesus seems to be in control.

2—JESUS HAS REAL ANGUISH

Just in case we think that Jesus’ self-composure was only possible because he was divine, and therefore above the fray, we should look a little deeper. We should remind ourselves that Jesus was also human. Behind that control described by the Gospel of Luke, we can also see that Jesus had real anguish. Jesus lived in flesh and blood just like you and me. He knew pain and sorrow, disappointment and betrayal, doubt and worry, just like us.

We see this side of Jesus when we realize that Jesus’ prayer, “Into your hands I commit my spirit,” was a quotation from Psalm 31. The Psalms were the hymns that Jews sang every time they got together for worship in the temple or synagogue. They probably also sang these hymns in their homes with their families. Jesus, the writer of Luke, and other Jews of their day would have known this Psalm 31 well. They would have known that along with this one line about committing one’s spirit into God’s hands were also many other lines asking God to deliver the troubled one from affliction and anguish,

distress and sorrow, weakness and grief, conspiring enemies and slandering neighbors. Jews familiar with Psalm 31 would have known that, when Jesus quoted this line of the hymn, he was remembering all the other lines as well. It would be like if I said, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,” you would automatically think, “that saved a *wretch* like me.” In your mind, you’d fill in the blank. Yes, Jesus was in calm control. But it wasn’t because he was free from troubles. Just like you and me, and maybe even more so, Jesus experienced real-life human anguish.

3—GREATER, JESUS HAS SPIRITUAL PEACE

OK, so the writer of Luke’s gospel assumed that everyone would understand that hanging on the cross was no Sunday School picnic or Palm Sunday parade. But the writer of Luke still chose to depict Jesus primarily in the calm, controlled fashion of a person who could offer forgiveness to others and turn over his own spirit to God. So our next question is, “How did Jesus maintain his control?” In the face of death, how did Jesus keep his calm composure? He did so, I believe, because greater than his real anguish, Jesus had spiritual peace.

Imagine Jesus hanging on the cross for hours. Psalm 31 naturally comes into his mind, with its many words about distress, sorrow, grief, and anguish. But along with those words, Jesus also remembers other lines: “In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame; deliver me in your righteousness . . . You are my rock and my fortress . . . Save me in your unfailing love.” Jesus bolsters his courage with Psalm 31’s final verse: “Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the Lord.” Without a doubt, Jesus’ crucifixion was horrible. But he was able to hold himself together through it all because he had spiritual peace that was greater.

This is really important for us to hear. I think it’s fairly safe to say that none of us will ever be crucified. But many of us will go through some very tough experiences in our lives. Rejection. Abandonment. Loss of love. Loss of employment. Loss of a home. Trauma. Betrayal. Abuse. Physical

injury or disease. Disappointment. Addiction. Depression. The violent death of a loved one. We can let those very negative experiences destroy us, or we can seek and find spiritual peace that is greater.

4—SPIRITUAL PEACE COMES FROM . . .

OK, so how do we get this greater spiritual peace that we need? It seems to me that Jesus gained spiritual peace in two ways.

The first was by having a close relationship with God. Did you notice how this seventh of Jesus' last words began? "*Father*, into your hands I commit my spirit." While for some people the word "father" can conjure up images of neglect or abuse, most of us understand the word "father" in the way Jesus meant it. When Jesus spoke of his "father," he was talking about someone who was dear to him. When Jesus prayed to his "father," he was conversing with someone who was an intimate and beloved parent. When Jesus spoke to his "father," he was talking to someone Jesus believed had his best interests at heart, someone who had nurtured him since before he was born, someone who had provided for his daily needs, someone who had given him guidance, and someone who would share life with him forever. When Jesus voiced this very last sentence before he died, he was connecting with the one who understood him best, the one with whom Jesus had the strongest possible relationship.

This familial relationship with God gave Jesus the inner strength he needed to hold up under extreme duress. Knowing God on that intimate level was what allowed Jesus to keep his head through his torture, humiliation, and suffering. Trusting that God cared about him that personally was what enabled Jesus to stay calm and in control.

As Christians, we believe that God and Jesus had a unique "father-son" relationship. We don't think we could be that close. And maybe that's true. But Jesus did teach that his followers could come to God through him, and that we could all become God's children. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he didn't say, "*My father, who art in heaven.*" Jesus said, "*Our father.*"

Just like in any relationship, we grow closer by spending time together. We become more sure of our heavenly father when we spend time in prayer and worship. We grow more confident of God's help when we hear the testimonies of other Christians and learn the biblical stories of old. Like Jesus, our relationship with God is strengthened as we sing *often enough* that we can recall verses like:

O God, our help in ages past,
 our hope for years to come,
 be thou our guide while life shall last
 and our eternal home. (Isaac Watts, 1719)

We gain spiritual peace when we have a close, trusting relationship with God.

We also gain spiritual peace by committing ourselves to God. Making a commitment is taking action. It isn't a victim stance of waiting and worrying about what's going to happen. Nor is it fretting and complaining about what someone else already did to me.

There was a lot Jesus could have resented. He could have hung on the cross bitterly complaining about how badly people had treated him. He could have gone to his death cursing God and the authorities. With those others hanging on crosses nearby, Jesus could have had quite a pity party. But he didn't. Instead, he made the conscious, active, and clear choice to take charge of his situation. No one else would determine his fate. As weakened as his body was, Jesus chose to rise above the circumstances and commit his spirit to God.

My dear people, I hope you can hear this wisdom. When cancer invades your body, don't be a victim. Commit your spirit to God. When your children take your car keys away from you and tell you that you can't drive anymore, commit your spirit to God. When your spouse cheats on you and your marriage falls apart, commit your spirit to God. When your boss promotes someone else when you were more worthy, rise above the anger. Commit yourself to God. That's the way you'll find spiritual peace even when life is unbearable. That's the way you'll maintain control even when chaos is swirling around you.

CONCLUSION

Some years ago, I heard about a certain type of caterpillar that can live under water or on dry ground. As far as scientists knew at the time, that caterpillar was unique among living creatures. All the rest of us that walk, crawl, swim, or fly have made a choice somewhere along our evolutionary development. We can't exist in the opposite environment for any length of time, or we'll die. According to the scientist telling the story, all the rest of us creatures "made a commitment to having lungs or gills."

Well, folks, there may be some rare one among us who is unique like that caterpillar and can live well without making a commitment. But I dare say most of us are like Jesus and need to make a choice. If we're going to have spiritual peace and inner calm in the face of crisis and tragedy, then we need to be clear in our hearts and minds. If we want to maintain control, even when chaos threatens to overwhelm us, then we, like Jesus, need to say, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

Unison Prayer from UM Hymnal #607—"A Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition"

I am no longer my own, but thine.
 Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.
 Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
 Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,
 exalted for thee or brought low by thee.
 Let me be full, let me be empty.
 Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
 I freely and heartily yield all things
 to thy pleasure and disposal.
 And now, O glorious and blessed God,
 Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
 thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.
 And the covenant which I have made on earth,
 Let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.