March 17 – Fifth Sunday in Lent

I Thirst

John 19:28-29

“I thirst.” This simple statement that Jesus made before he died almost seems out of place among the other more dramatic statements he made from the cross. Yet this seemingly insignificant statement is recorded by John alone, and with John, almost every seemingly insignificant statement is a clue to the deeper meaning of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.

Before trying to understand the profound importance of Jesus’ words we need to hear that this is the third offering of wine as contained in all of the gospels. The first time that Jesus was offered wine occurred before he was crucified. Mark says, “They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha and offered him wine mixed with myrrh. Matthew says the wine was mixed with gall. Both say that when Jesus tasted it, he would not drink it.

Scholars have great debates over this story but one of the most likely interpretations is that myrrh and gall were ways of speaking of poisons that were thought to expedite death or possibly to deaden the pain. If this is the case, then someone, likely one of the women who stood at the feet of the cross, was trying to show compassion to Jesus in offering him this drink. But when Jesus tasted the wine he refused to drink it. If all of our suppositions are true then Jesus decided to endure his crucifixion with a clear mind. He wanted to be aware of what was happening and communicate some more with those around him. He was willing to endure great pain for our sake.

The second offer of wine occurred sometime after Jesus was nailed to the cross. Luke records that the soldiers offered wine to Jesus in mockery, as though it were a toast. It is unlikely that Jesus actually would have been able to drink this wine. It is another reminder of how cruel and heartless was his treatment that day.

Now we come to the third one, the one recorded in John. In Matthew and Mark after he cries out, “My God, my God, why have your forsaken me?” they took a stick and
affixed a sponge to it, dipped it in sour wine and offered Jesus a drink. But in John
Jesus requests a drink. John says it was to fulfill scripture. We are not completely sure
which scripture but it was likely Psalm 69:21b “For my thirst they gave me vinegar to
drink.” For the wine they offered him was more like vinegar.

Where is the meaning for us? We have touched on this first part before. This
shows the complete humanity of Jesus. When we are with one who is dying we see that
they become thirsty. Typically someone will bring a cup of ice chips and a spoon to
place a chip or two on the person’s tongue. Or they use a little sponge on a stick and
soak it in water so that the dying person can draw water into his or her mouth. Jesus
being thirsty shows us in a way that nothing else can, his humanity. By the time John
wrote his gospel there were those who saw Jesus as a spirit who only appeared to be a
man. Because such a spirit could not die, or even feel pain, he only seemed to die on
the cross. They said it was merely a drama. These Christians became known as
Docetist. John wanted all who read his account to know Jesus was human and he took
an experience shared by most, that a dying person is thirsty, to show unequivocally the
humanity of Christ.

A second meaning to these words, “I thirst” relates to an analogy Jesus used to
describe his suffering. Remember how Jesus asked James and John, who wanted to sit
at his right and left hand, “Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” Or in
John, as Jesus was being arrested, Peter drew his sword but Jesus told him, “Put your
sword back into its sheath. Am I not to drink th
the cup that the Father has given me?”
Jesus used the metaphor of drinking as a way of describing the suffering he would face.
With this in mind we can see how his words might have had a deeper meaning. It is
possible that Jesus’ words were pointing to the fact that he was willing to drink the cup
of suffering down to the dregs. Or, that the cup was nearly empty, that he had
completed his mission.

A final way to look at these words is to think about some of those Psalms that
equate seeking for God with thirst. Psalm 42:1-2 says, “As a deer longs for flowing
streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”
Perhaps when Jesus said, “I thirst” it had only a little to do with his physical needs and
everything to do with his longing to be with God, renewed by God. He who had said, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” now shares his longing for God. He who had said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied.” now thirsts for these things as well, knowing he will be satisfied.

This is the image I want to hold on to. If we think that Jesus, just before he dies is saying again, my whole being thirsts for God, what does that say to us? What are we thirsting for today? Too often the things we thirst for, long for, are material things. We believe if we have that new car, house, boat, whatever we will find satisfaction. We know that isn’t the case. These words are a reminder to seek for God.

And, John adds one other interesting fact. While Matthew and Mark talk about them putting a sponge on a reed, John indicates that the stick was actually a branch of hyssop. Hyssop is a small, busy plant, and affixing a sponge of any size to a hyssop branch would be an odd and nearly impossible task. This likely means John has something else to tell us. It was Passover and when the Jews commemorated God’s greatest act of salvation on their behalf, God’s deliverance of his people from slavery in Egypt. As part of the preparations for Passover they were to take the blood of the sacrificed lamb and using a branch of hyssop, sprinkle it over their doorposts just as their ancestors had done so long ago.

Only John calls Jesus the “Lamb of God.” Only in John’s gospel does Jesus’ crucifixion take place as the Passover lambs are being slaughtered in the Temple. For John, the hyssop branch was one more clue pointing to Jesus’ identity as the sacrifice that would save all from death and deliver them from slavery to sin. Likewise, the hyssop branch was used in purification rites. When someone became unclean the priest would sprinkle the person with water using a hyssop branch. John was saying Jesus came to save and cleanse us from our sins.

And, so again my question. We call ourselves disciples of Christ, ones who follow his teaching and his example. John reminds us that throughout this tragic day Jesus’ mind was on God. He finally shares, “I thirst.” Yes he was thirsty as any dying man
would be. But more, he was thirsty for God. He knew that in God he would find fulfillment. So, are you thirsty for God?

This reminds me of the story of a woman who moved to a new town. She went to church and liked the people and the sermon by the pastor was o.k. She asked if there was a Bible study that she could attend. There was a silence. It seems that the teacher of the class had become ill and passed away a short time before. No one else was willing to take on the role of teacher so the class had disbanded. She looked at everyone in surprise. “Aren’t you thirsty for God’s word?” She then offered to facilitate the class but made it clear that all would have to take their turns leading the class because she never wanted that church to be thirsty again.

Are we, like Jesus, thirsty for God? That is the question his simple request causes us to ask today.