

"A Word from the Cross: Trust"

When I was serving as Chaplain at the Presbyterian Community, I learned that very few Christians are afraid of death. If you have given your heart to God, then death means Eternal life and, while none of us really knows what Heaven is like, we are assured that it is a glorious place. Free from pain, illness, conflict and doubts. Our Scriptures tell us this often. And this is what allows us, as people of the Risen Christ, to be hopeful as we celebrate the resurrection of someone we love.

But I *have* learned in my ministry that many people, even Christians, *ARE* afraid of dying. Of how they are going to *get* to Heaven. That's why Kenny Chesney sings, "Everybody wants to go to Heaven but nobody wants to go now." But this rings true because we are afraid of the process, not the destination. Let's be honest – everyone's real hope is that one day, you will just wake up dead.

Jesus, our Lord and Savior, had three long hours to die. Three hours of extreme pain and torture and suffering on our behalf. I wonder what any one of us would do in this situation. Well, our God made flesh spent those hours talking to his Father and talking to those around him. And in doing so, he not only left us beautiful words of wisdom, love and promises of hope. He also gave us an example of how to live.

As I have studied the "Seven Words from the Cross" as they are known, I have prayed for the Spirit to give me ONE word each week to share with you and this week, the word I heard was TRUST. "Father into your hands, I commend my Spirit." Many of us would wonder why Jesus felt it necessary to utter this, knowing that he would soon return to Heaven from whence he

came. Perhaps Jesus was offering this word for US, so that we could learn what it really means to trust our Lord. Here is what I believe Jesus was telling us.

In Greek, the word "commend" or "commit", as some translations read, means to trust for protection. Jesus is saying that he is willing to give God everything he has – his work, his struggles, his joys, his pain, his family and yes, even his death, because he knows that, when all is said and done, God will protect him. God will be with him until the end. God will make the suffering have a purpose. And I believe that Jesus is reminding us not only that we can die with God, trusting in God's mercy but that we can fully live for God, trusting in God's grace. This sounds poetic, almost romantic. But here is what it really means.

It means that we cannot go to church on Sunday and speak kindly to one another and praise the choir and show appreciation to our Sunday School teacher for a lesson well taught and then go home and yell at our spouse and kids. It means we can't go to Youth Group and listen respectfully and pray with our "church" friends and then go to school tomorrow and ridicule the way someone wears her hair or be disrespectful to our teachers. It means that we cannot go to Circle or Fellowship Club and read the Scriptures and pray with one another and then go out in the parking lot and gossip. Giving your life to God means giving ALL of your life. Not just when it is easy. Not just when it is convenient.

Giving your life to God means loving people who are unlovable and forgiving people who do unforgiveable things. It means doing what is right rather than what is popular. No, we cannot commend our lives into God's hands on Sundays and then take them back the rest of the week. And this is not always easy. Because life is hard and people are not always, well, pleasant. And reality tells us that trusting your life into God's hands does not mean living without pain.

I really think there are people who try to hold onto the myth that, once you become a follower of Christ, life will be all beauty and joy. But anyone with a lick of sense knows that this is not the case. I would love to stand here and say that if you are a Christian that you will never suffer but I try never to be dishonest, especially in the pulpit. The truth is that if a Christian hits his thumb with a hammer, it will hurt just as badly as if he were a Buddhist or an Atheist. And followers of Christ die of cancer and are abused and grow tired and hungry every day. But God does promise us that God will never allow anything worse to happen to us than happened to his Son. And where does that leave us?

It leaves us putting our most valuable possession – OUR LIVES, not just our deaths – into the hands of God. But when you think about it, this really should not be hard. God gave each of us life to begin with. So it is only right that we will give it back to him. However, the truth is that when you give your life to God, it can be pretty scary because you never know what God will do with it! Jesus' prayer on the cross, as he faces the worst circumstances that anyone could imagine is this: I trust you God to use even this for your glory.

I recently shared the very long story about my call to ministry with our youth. I happened to be at Montreat, attending a conference for Christian Educators because I *thought* that is what God wanted me to do. My husband was very excited since I volunteered so much at our home church. He saw this as a way for me to get paid for doing what I was already doing.

However, while I was there, the Lord made it clear to me that God's plan for my life was to become an Ordained minister. Our children were 5 and 9 years old. I had no idea what qualifications I needed to have in order to pursue this. But I knew without a doubt that it was God's plan. When I came home and told my husband THIS newsflash, after the initial shock, he agreed to educate a THIRD child, namely me, and began paying tuition to Erskine Seminary.

I did not return to Montreat for 7 more years and, on the morning I was to accompany a group of residents up to see the new chapel there, Danny admitted that he was pretty nervous about me going. When I asked him why he said, "Last time you went to Montreat, it ended up costing me a bunch of money." My response was, "Oh, you don't need to worry. The only place left for God to call me is to the mission field and even GOD wouldn't ask me to go somewhere if I couldn't take my electric rollers!" But friends, it doesn't really work that way. When we give our lives to God we truly are offering to have God do with that life as God wills.

I also believe that in this word on the cross, Jesus was teaching us how to pray. Jesus was letting us know that when we are facing darkness, depression, addiction, grief, fear of the unknown, or the valley of the shadow of death, we can trust God to face life's challenges with us. We can ask God to walk through the valley, to laugh with us in our joys, to hold us when we weep, and God will do just that. Methodist minister Will Willimon says that when we take the life that God has graciously given us and give it back to God, it is the greatest act of stewardship. I believe the best way to convey this to our Heavenly Maker is through prayer. In this way, we are sincerely seeking God's will and trusting God to use our accomplishments and our failures for our good and God's glory.

And I will tell you honestly, that this has always been my favorite word from the cross because, according to tradition, this word is a word from Jesus' own childhood. You see, historians tell us that, just as we teach our children their first prayers at bedtime, "Now I lay me down to sleep", Hebrew women taught their children to pray, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Isn't that beautiful?

Even as Jesus hung, broken and bleeding, dying on a tree, he remembered the assuring words that his mother taught him to offer God as he went to sleep each night. So not only was he

remembering his Father, but in a way, he was remembering his mother too. What joy it must have brought to her heart, as she stood close enough to the cross for him to see that she would never leave him. Jesus trusted God in death with all that he had because his mother had taught him that this is the best way to live. Trusting God with each day.

This prayer is what brought to my mind the verse from Romans that we heard earlier, one that is often read at Memorial Services. "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."

And Jesus' complete trust in God, even in his suffering, along with Paul's instructions to the church of Rome kept one question burning in my mind. So I will pass that question on to each of you for your consideration. That question is WHY WAIT? Why wait until we are dying to trust God with our lives at the end. Jesus didn't.

Jesus left the comfort of his earthly father's carpentry shop to live a nomadic life of poverty and constant struggle because he knew it was the will of God. Jesus confronted the Pharisees and other religious leaders of the day, because he knew God sent him to preach that love is more important than legalism. Jesus prayed in the Garden, "not my will, but yours."

And in the end, he trusted God with his life and his death. Years ago, when I first learned that Jesus' mother had taught him this prayer, I decided to make it my own. Personally, I find if I pray too long at night, I usually end up falling asleep because I am too tired to tell God about my day, which God already knows about any way. So I end each night by simply praying, "Into your hands I commend my Spirit."

But if I am going to try to live the lesson of trust that Jesus offered on the cross, why wait until nighttime? So I have decided to start each day the same way. Commending my spirit into God's hands before I get up AND as I lie down.

Jesus' thought it was important enough, while he was dying on the cross, to remind us to trust in the Lord always. If it was that important to Jesus, then perhaps it should be that important to us as well. Amen.

Nazareth Presbyterian Church

March 12, 2017