

## Death on a Friday Afternoon: Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Thanks for coming this morning. I got the call earlier this week to be your substitute teacher...my initial reaction was hmmm...what have they been learning?...I need to get really smart really fast on something. When George reminded me that this is the first Sunday in Lent and the talk – where possible should reflect that – I knew immediately that I wanted to talk about this book.

This book – “Death on a Friday Afternoon: Meditations on the Last Words of Jesus From the Cross” – is one that I used to read every year for Lent. I guess you could say that it has been part of my Lenten discipline. I have probably read this book 20 times. I understand that it may sound boring to read the same book every year...I know...you want to party with me. Yes, I know the plot – the hero dies – but I guess it’s an indication of how incredibly well written a book is when you can read it over and over and learn something different – experience something different each time. I experience the book differently each year not because the book is changing – that would be weird – but because I am changing...I am in a very different place intellectually, emotionally, spiritually every year.

The book addresses what are considered to be the last seven statements of Jesus – a montage of statements of Jesus from the Cross taken from the four Gospels.

The idea of a meditation on the last “seven words” of Christ is not unique to this book...this has been a common theme of devotion in both Protestantism and Catholicism in music, books and art. Examples include work from composers like Haydn, Beethoven, Dvorak. Mediations on these last seven words appear in the dreams of Leopold Bloom in James Joyce’s Ulysses. In his last sermon in 1630, John Donne drew parallels between these last seven words and the seven days of the week.

As an aside, do you recall what the New Testament identifies as the last words of Mary? They come from the Gospel of John’s retelling of the story of the wedding at Cana when the host runs out of wine. Mary brings this to Jesus’s attention, where he turns to her with what could be perceived as a rebuke and says “How does this affect me? My hour has not yet come” and Mary turns to the servants and says “Do whatever he tells you”.

The person who knew Jesus better than anyone on Earth...her last words are “Do whatever he tells you”. As I am sure you can imagine, there are have been reflections throughout history on these last words of Mary.

So, what are these last seven “words” that have attracted the attention of writers, composers, poets and Christians throughout history?

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Before I talk about these, just a brief introduction to the writer...

Father Richard John Neuhaus died in 2009. He was an ordained Lutheran Pastor and later in life became a Roman Catholic priest. He was a prolific writer – while I don’t know that either would necessarily appreciate the comparison, I find his writings as inspiring and as moving as Thomas Merton’s. He is frequently compared to CS Lewis. He was the long time editor of the monthly journal *First Things* and served as an unofficial adviser to 43rd President George W. Bush on bioethical issues. This book – which I think was his most popular – was published in 2001. I purchased the book that year.

I would like to turn my attention to the first statement – “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”. Father Neuhaus shadow title’s this chapter “Coming to our senses”. The writing is very dense and beautifully reflected. I am going to try to do it justice.

The days leading up to Easter are called in Latin the Triduum Sacrum – the three most sacred days of the year. The first of these is Maundy Thursday. The term Maundy comes from the latin “*mandatum*” or “mandate” – the mandate that Jesus gave us to love on another. Not the light or easy love of desire, but rather a demanding, uncomfortable love of service to each other...a demeaning level of love that is manifested figuratively and literally in the washing of feet. Of a vulnerability that will – at some point – lead to being hurt and abandoned by those who you love and trust. That is our call. The second day of the Triduum is Good Friday – the day that we are asked to experience the pain and bleakness of abandonment and death. Its black, dark and painful. We are asked to pause and spend time in reflection and mourning. Of course the final day is the great Easter Vigil, with the bright colors and light of hope and joy...of rebirth and celebration.

But Father Neuhaus warns the reader not to rush to the light of celebration...but rather to allow your heart to be broken by the unspeakable pain and suffering of Good Friday. He asks the reader to truly be present in the day “let your present moment stay with this day. Stay awhile in the eclipse of the light, stay awhile with the conquered one. There will be time enough for Easter”.

Don't rush to the light.

On the fourth Sunday of Lent, we read the parable of the prodigal son from Luke. I don't know if the parable was intended to be a foretelling of the Passion and death of Christ, but the parallels are there. The son was not happy – he was probably tired of living in the shadow of his older brother. He was probably depressed...emotionally he was probably in a very dark place. The son leaves. He leaves his dad, his family. But in the story, we are lead to believe that it's not a quiet departure on good terms... You can almost see the scene – the discontented son, who has probably been fighting with his father on and off for several years, appears to leave in a tempest of emotion... – I am done with you. I can do better elsewhere. You are holding me back. I can't wait for you to die – I want your stuff now". The arrogance and the petulance expressed by the son are almost incomprehensible. He appears to come from a loving, normal home, where he appears to have been afforded most of the comforts of the time. But for him, none of this was enough. He wanted more – or at least something different from what he had. He appears to be restless and lacking contentment. We are told that he left for a "distant" land. This word "distant" I think was intentional. It communicates that the son was not just leaving to expand his horizons or sow his oats. He was cutting his ties, with

likely little or no expectation of returning. There was a “death” here of his relationship to his father and to his family. He was rushing to the light. His father’s heart was broken – but he gave his son all he could....there was probably a great explosion of passion and hurt feelings. He wasted his money...he wasted his youth. “He knew not what he was doing”. Destitute he was reduced to feeding the pigs and then envying the slop that they ate.

In this parable we then encounter, the grace-filled words – “He came to his senses”.

Neuhaus writes “From this madness, from the darkness of delusion, we are told that he turned his face homeward...In coming to his senses, he returned to the father”. When he “came to his senses” we are told that he says “I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you...I am no longer worthy to be called your son”. We can imagine the picture...right?...the embarrassed and emptied son...with nowhere else to go...loping home with his baggage. We are reminded of Jesus’s words, “Come to me, all of you who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest”. Give your baggage to me.

Neuhaus explains that the son encountered the depths of hell – a self-imposed hell. When he was at the bottom – envying the pigs for their slop

– he basically could have taken two paths. Interestingly, both would have taken him back to the father in different ways. He could have continued on the path that he was on – following his own arrogance and pride – where he “knew not what he did”, and most likely died, or he could go home. But going “home” spiritually, required that he “come to his senses”. This “coming to our senses” is difficult – it’s an admission that we can’t do it on our own...that we need help. And this is easier for some than others.

A few years ago, there was a wonderful priest here by the name of Elizabeth Rector – she went on to become the head of her own parish in California – making her Rector Rector ☺. One night over dinner, I asked Elizabeth if she believed in hell – a real and physical hell. Her answer surprised me. She said that “Hell” is what we create for ourselves when we get everything we ever thought we wanted – and we are still unhappy. We see this don’t we? We see very public examples of young, promising Hollywood ingénues who appear to have everything, but are so miserable they completely self-destruct in sad public spectacles. The Prodigal Son in Luke’s story no doubt found himself in a Hell that he had sought out and intentionally created for himself – because he knew not what he did...but he came to his senses and returned home...figuratively and literally.

All of us have probably experienced a time where we were blinded by passion... passion for an idea, an artistic impulse or an object of affection that no matter what you do you just can't shake. You say and do things that simply "aren't you". Passion can take away your ability think straight...it affects your ability to work, to sleep...like a chemical addition that rewires your brain. "You know not what you do". But when the passion fades...when the chemical addition has been recognized...you have a moment of clarity...you come to your senses.

Importantly, the Prodigal Son is also a story of atonement. At One Ment...what was separated is now "at one". But after such separation, reunion is not easy. As we all know, when personal relationships are broken, reconciliation is hard. Painful at times. But we do it because it matters. With extended family, at work, with neighbors, friends.

When I know I have hurt someone and I apologize, I find it hollow and hurtful when the other person says "its ok...it does not matter. No worries. Its all good". No its not. When a relationship has been broken, stating that "it does not matter" does not help reconciliation. In reduces the value of the relationship. The strongest friendships I have are where one of us screwed up somewhere along the line and we had to talk through

it...acknowledgement that wrongs were committed and feelings were hurt are uncomfortable. When something terrible happens...and we know its terrible...the fear of consequences is terrible...but not as abysmal as the fear of nothing happening. Its all good. No worries.

That is not consistent with atonement – with at one ment.

The story of the prodigal son is again, one of at one ment. He was blinded by passion...he knew not what he was doing...he broke the relationship and contributed to hurt and pain...he came to his senses and came back to his father.

Some of you may have heard me discuss in previous talks the quote “The only simplicity worth trusting is the simplicity on the far side of the complexity”. It’s a great quote...as a professor of statistics, this quote almost summarizes my philosophy related to teaching. The idea is that I can show a student a formula or a technique without the math...we can always use some kind of “point and click” interface...a black box...and they can generate results. We will call that the “near side” of the complexity of some kind of quantitative concept. But we don’t stop there...I frequently...much to their dismay...make them do some of the calculations by hand...make them derive the function inside the box...actually learn the

math...that brings them to the same answer. Then when they go back and use a computer or a point and click software package...they understand what is happening inside that “box”...they moved through the complexity and back to the simple. They end up in the same place...but they are smarter than when they started. The simplicity on the far side of the complexity.

Returning to Good Friday...Father Neuhaus asks the reader not to rush to the light of Easter without pausing for the pain and hurt of Good Friday. It's the simplicity on the far side of the complexity. Easter without Good Friday is the simplicity on the near side of the complexity.

Without the consequences of Good Friday, then the promises of Easter are less meaningful – no worries...it's all good... It's the experience of Good Friday that allows us to come to our senses...to create the at one ment...and fully embrace the joy of Easter.

So...these are my reflections on the first chapter – the first of the last seven words of Jesus... You can see here that the next chapter is dedicated to the words “Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise”. The shadow title that Father Neuhaus provides here is “Judge Not”.

I don't think I have time to start the next chapter...but maybe I can come back at some point...and maybe we can cover the rest of the book...maybe by Christmas...