

Father, Into Your Hands I Commit My Spirit **Luke 23:33-46**

The Crucifixion

³³When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left. ³⁴But Jesus was saying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” And they cast lots, dividing up His garments among themselves. ³⁵And the people stood by, looking on. And even the rulers were sneering at Him, saying, “He saved others; let Him save Himself if this is the Christ of God, His Chosen One.” ³⁶The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up to Him, offering Him sour wine, ³⁷and saying, “If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!” ³⁸Now there was also an inscription above Him, “THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.” ³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged *there* was hurling abuse at Him, saying, “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!” ⁴⁰But the other answered, and rebuking him said, “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹“And we indeed *are suffering* justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” ⁴²And he was saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” ⁴³And He said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” ⁴⁴It was now about ^othe sixth hour, and darkness fell over ^othe whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵because the sun was obscured; and the veil of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said,

“Father, INTO YOUR HANDS I COMMIT MY SPIRIT.”

The other day as I was coming up an on-ramp to enter I-80, the road narrowed and the arrows pointed for me to move toward my left. As I did another vehicle was accelerating from behind and coming up on my left. As I saw it, I quickly pulled to the right to avoid a collision. Then I saw the flashing red lights in my rear view mirror. I was in the hands of the law!

I know what it means to be in the hands of the law. It is like being in the grip of an illness. It is not something you want. It is not something you consciously choose. To be in the hands of the law meant that I had been caught for changing lanes without signaling. I was under judgment. I was being written up. I must pay the penalty, and when I do, I will once again be under the illusion that I am somehow free.

But what does it mean to be in the hands of God? That is different.

This involves trust and faith. It requires commitment and faithfulness on my part. To commit is to voluntarily turn something over to one who is trustworthy. It means give it back to the original giver. That is what it means to commit oneself to God. To commit yourself into God’s hands means that you have decided to let God use your life to make

the world a better place. That is a different kind of commitment. It involves your will, your trust, your faithfulness. The hymn writer had it exactly:

He leadeth me...

What'er I do, wher-er I be.

Still' tis God's hand that leadeth me.

The commitment under the law is imposed judgment. The commitment to God is chosen. Commitment under the law is an incentive to “straighten up and fly right.” The commitment to God is about faithfulness. The commitment to the law is an obligation to pay the penalty and walk away. The commitment to God is a life-time of witnessing to God's faithful presence. You do not just walk away as it suits you. This is not something you can pay off and leave behind. No, God's call to commitment keeps on coming. It fills our lives with challenge, hope and new purpose.

You and I are constantly called to commitment. We are faced with choices. But what of our lives do we commit to God, and what of our self do we hold back? Perhaps we think that we can do a better job than God.

To commit, sometimes means to throw caution to the wind, to risk and take that step into the unknown, not knowing for certain, what comes next. This is scary, perhaps, too scary. It is this scary quality of faith that we are called to live when we turn our eyes and behold Jesus on the Cross. We should be shocked into silence, but are we?

When I was a student at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, a Jewish psychologist pulled me aside as I was making my hospital rounds. It was Holy Week. He had a question for me. “Archie, why do you Christians try to out do Jesus, especially on Easter? Wasn't the Cross enough?!” “I think that if I was a Christian, I would be sitting in stunned silence at what God had just done!”

I had no answer for him. I still do not. Perhaps we are like those, in Luke's gospel, who gathered near the cross and hear those powerful words, “Father, into Thy hand I commit my Spirit.” And with those words, he transformed the power of death. “Death,” the Apostle interrogated, “Where is your sting?!” “Where is your victory?!” Death did not have final say.

But as I stand at the foot of the cross, I wonder about something else. The church's apathy; its accommodation to culture; its pursuit of prosperity for prosperity's sake; its avoidance of the cross.

Is the Church in the hands of unquestioned apathy? Is it indifferent to God's work in the world? We are no longer stunned, as was my Jewish friend. Those words, “Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit” is really more radical than I can imagine. It is hard for me to imagine not fighting to stay alive or stay in control of something that is important to me. It is hard for me to imagine giving up complete control on something that I have worked on so hard and for so long. Isn't that what drives presidential hopefuls onward—when there are set backs? Hang in there! Fight! Don't give up!

In 1969, I had become a new doctoral student at Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts. It was my first semester, and I felt very insecure in that Ph.D. program. I worked so hard to get there, and I was struggling to stay there. But there was a conference out there, 3,000 miles away, in Oakland, California. I wanted to attend. It was called by the National Committee of Black Churches. Should I go... travel 3000 miles and let for by distancing myself from my doctoral program? Or should I stay and work hard on my assignments? After all, the Dean of the school had already called me into his office to talk with me about my progress. I worked so hard to get there. My academic life and future was on the line. Should I let go? Or should I hand on?

To let go meant putting myself in God's hand.

To hang on meant pulling back on trusting God. Save myself.

Should I go? Should I stay? What would Jesus do?

"Father, into Thy hands I commit my Spirit." Jesus, you are too radical. Why didn't you save yourself, Jesus?! Come down and show us your Lazarus-like power. Haven't you ever heard of "Homeland Security," Jesus? Why didn't you do everything you could to appease the authorities, stay out of trouble, run for public office? You could have made it if you tried! Why didn't you build a nice nest for yourself and kickback?

Who cares?! Wasn't this death of Jesus just one more crucifixion? Was this just one more death? Wasn't this just one more Oakland, I mean, Palestine statistic? So, many... we have grown use to it. We are no longer stunned. Apathy! We have grown indifferent. We say, "heard it all before." There is nothing new, after all, this is a violent world where people are raped and murdered every single day, in urban centers, public schools, at work, in banks, on street corners, college campuses, church parking lots, places of worship. Churches are burned. Synagogues are defaced. Temples are bombed. Journalists are murdered in broad day light. Who cares!

We are not longer stunned. The radical words of Jesus, "Father, into Thy Hands I commit my Spirit," no longer seems radical. We have made it safe.

Faith has been made safe when we are no longer challenged to go into the unknown. Someone said, faith really means the ability not to panic. But I say to you, faith involves more than panic attacks. Faith has been tamed when we say, 'If you worry, you didn't pray. If you pray, don't worry.' But I say to you, faith is more than worrying and praying. Faith means going ahead, anyway, in spite of obstacles, and face the worry even when our prayers are not answered. Faith is more than an antidote to worry.

We make faith safe when we say, "As a child of God, prayer is kind of like calling home everyday." But I say to you that faith is more than a security blanket and more than a call home. Faith is made tame when we say, "Do the math, count your blessings." But I say to you that faith involves more than counting. It means stepping into the unknown and taking risks even when things do not add up.

Faith for Jesus meant trusting God in the face of hunger, in the face of ridicule, abandonment and projections, through cruel suffering and all the way to death on the Cross.

Why should we not be apathetic? Why should we care? After all, didn't Jesus pay it all? Why should I suffer or why should we suffer if Jesus took my place, already took the rap for me, for us? Is the best thing for me to do to take-care of my own business, look out for my own safety, build up my own prosperity?

This past summer, I attended an International Conference on Pastoral Care in Poland. About mid-point, 4 of us decided to slip away and do something we felt we needed to do, but feared doing. We went to visit the former Nazi death camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. There over a million-and-a-half people, mostly Jews, children, women, men were destroyed by the instruments of apathy, indifference, extreme prejudice and hatred. At one point I came to the end of the railroad tracks that lead into the death camp. What brought me here, I wondered. Was it because Auschwitz-Birkenau was a place where care was defeated by apathy, indifference and an extreme form of prejudice?

I could only sit in stunned silence. No words were adequate. This was a time to keep silence. This experience was far beyond speech. I could only think the question, "Where was God when those children, women and men needed God the most?" Where was the church?!

And, where was God, when Jesus cried out in his pain? What Jesus did was radical. He called to God. He did not wait for an answer. He took a further step into the unknown and put himself into the out stretched hands of God.

I am reminded of the hymn,

Jesus calls us, O'er the tumult of our life's wild restless sea,

Day by day His sweet voice soundeth, saying Christian, follow me.

The story is told of Irene Sendler, a 97-year old Polish woman who was called day-by-day to save Jewish children during the Nazi reign of power. She took on the soul wrenching job of taking crying babies from their mother's arms to steal them away to safety. It is said that she smuggled 25,000 children out of the Warsaw Ghetto. She found a home for each child. She did not have to do this. But she committed herself to it, day-by-day.

She could have made excuses. She could have turned her head and said, "I don't want to get involved." She could have ignored the plight of her neighbors. But God called her day-by-day in those tumultuous and tragic circumstances. She found away to record every child's name on thin cigarette or tissue paper. She hid their names in a glass jar. The children were made safe in her hands. And after the war those children were returned to surviving relatives.

She was an ordinary person doing extraordinary things.

“Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
No hands but yours, no feet but yours;
Yours are the eyes through which to look at Christ’s compassion,
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good,
And yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.

St. Theresa of Avila.

That is what we, the Church, the Body of Christ are called to be and do today. When we only think of ourselves, the resurrection, victory, the good times and forget the cross, then our faith is shallow and irrelevant. We become superficial. The church may cry, peace, peace where there is no peace.

But, when we remember that Cross, Crucifixion and Resurrection are inseparable, then these words, “Father into Your Hands I commit my Spirit” become radical.

“Father, into Your hands, I commit my Spirit” is the invitation to come and follow Jesus, do as he did, to commit our self completely into the Hands of God, as he did. This requires a leap of faith and moving past apathy and indifference to the suffering of others. To do as Jesus did requires a leap from what we think is safe and secure into the open and out stretched hands of God. This is never easy. It is costly. It is radical. Amen.

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