John 19:28-29; Passion reading: Mark 14:66-15:15 March 18, 2015

**Why Do the Righteous Suffer?**

At first blush, Jesus’ words in the reading seem a little thing. ***“I am thirsty.”*** In fact, they *are* a little thing. In the original language they are a single word, two syllables. “I’m thirsty” is a phrase you might hear at the country club after a round of golf. People who say it obviously expect to quench their thirst in short order. You might hear *“I’m thirsty”* from a child too short yet to reach the glasses and the water faucet. It is a small request because of a slight tickle at the back of the throat. Now if it were 98 degrees outside and I had been on a hay-rack wagon throwing 80 pound bales for the entire afternoon I would be thirsty, but I wouldn’t say *“I’m thirsty.”* I would say something like, “I’m dry as a desert” or “I could drink an ocean.” It is easy to underestimate this word of Jesus: ***“I am thirsty.”***

Psychologists tell us that the strongest motivators are those directly connected with survival. You might really enjoy playing cards, but if it comes to an either/or of playing cards today or eating sometime today, food wins every time.

And other than a clear and present physical danger, thirst is the strongest motivator. Imagine being both very hungry and very thirsty. A hamburger and a cup of water are placed in front of you. Which would you grab first? People will just about always choose water.

If you have been dehydrated, you probably suffered small to moderate headaches. That is because as you dehydrate your body draws water off your organs, including your brain, to keep your blood thin. As it draws water off, your brain begins to shrink slightly thus causing headaches. Severe dehydration causes severe headaches.

Go a couple steps further. Death by thirst is an unhappy subjects. One radio-broadcast told of thirst in the old West. In arid climates, pioneers and explorers always ran the risk of running out of water. They had different descriptions of the poor souls who fell victim to a lack of water. They would describe the severity by the condition of the tongue. At first it sounds funny, but with a little imagination it is not. Some of the different stages of thirst included “swollen tongue”, “black tongue”, “leather tongue”.

In a sense, this week’s reading is very close to last week’s. Jesus asked that question, *“Why have you forsaken me?”* because of the tremendous spiritual and mental anguish he felt as he felt God’s judgment upon sin under a darkened sun. This week he speaks the shortest of his words from the cross, ***“I am thirsty.”*** This, too, focuses us on Jesus’ suffering, but this time the physical suffering.

When Jesus said, “I’m thirsty”, he was not simply a two-year old who wants his mother’s attention as much as a drink. Remember the previous day. For about 20 hours he had nothing to drink. Remember Gethsemane where he prayed so earnestly that the sweat poured from him, and then the beating and bruising, and then the scourging which tore the skin and led to more bleeding, and the crown of thorns (think of how head wounds bleed), and then the untreated nail wounds. All lead to fluid loss. When Jesus was beaten and scourged and then questioned, he answered nothing, gave no rebuke. Even at the moment of his crucifixion Jesus only spoke of forgiveness for others, not of his pain. But here, at the end of six hours on the cross, Jesus voices his one word about his physical suffering, ***“I am thirsty.”*** I believe that when the completely self-controlled Son of God says, “I’m thirsty” he speaks of a raging thirst that no one short of death can imagine. Such pain – and in an innocent and righteous man!

Was it right for this man to suffer in this way?

This world leads us to often ask, “Why do the righteous suffer?” We see people who do good things and instead receive evil. We know faithful spouses who have been cheated on. We know of children abused. We hear of nations terrorized. We hear of horrors visited upon people so terrible that we shut off the television and try to delete the image from our minds. Oh, Lord, why do the righteous suffer so?

This is a good question. And on the one side we should remember that one of God’s great concerns is for such people. The Bible consistently encourages us to act on behalf of those who suffer unjustly. *“Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed”* (Psalm 82:3). And *“religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress”* (James 1:27). God is overwhelmingly concerned that believers are also concerned about those who suffer unjustly.

But that isn’t the answer Jesus gave in answer to this question: “Why do the righteous suffer?” Think about it this way: no one ever asks the question, “Why do bad things happen to bad people?” No one asks that question because we are all pretty sure we know the answer. Bad things happen to bad people, so we think, because it is the natural result of doing bad things. Armed robbery – expect to spend time in prison. Do drugs and expect your brain to get messed up. Be a mean-spirited person and expect no friends. People who do bad things get what they deserve—so we think.

But earlier in his ministry Jesus had said something different about the bad things which happen to people. After a tall building in Jerusalem fell over, Jesus asked, *“Those eighteen [people] who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no!”* Jesus says, bad things happen to good people. Bad things happen to bad people. But what you should learn from it is this, *“Do you think they were more guilty?... I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”* (Luke 13:5). Jesus says that how a person dies has nothing to do with their righteousness. God allows such things in his own time and way. What every single bad thing should lead us to do is to realize that there are not righteous and unrighteous people, there are only unrighteous people. Every single one of us needs to repent.

So we have notice the difference between the worldly definition of righteousness and God’s definition. A righteous person by the worldly definition really means a “nice, kind-hearted person.” And why such people suffer is a good question, but for another sermon or Bible class. Worldly righteousness is not what we are talking about with Jesus. At the crucifixion we measure according to God’s righteousness. And when we ask the question, “Why do the righteous suffer?” we must remember that in the entire history of the world, there is only one truly righteous person who ever lived. The strangest thing is this: *“He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. Yet is was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer”* (Isaiah 53:9-10). Of all the people to walk the earth, why is it that the only one who was righteous had to suffer more than anyone else? *“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”* (2 Corinthians 5:21). Why does this righteous man suffer? Through the suffering of that one righteous man, we became the righteousness of God. That’s why. Amen.