

## **“Conversations on the Cross 5”**

Reading: Psalm 69:6-21, 29-30; John 19:28-37

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The thirstiest I can remember ever being was one hot day in the woods of southern Indiana. Contrary to what many people think, there are in fact both woods and hills in Indiana, especially in the southern part of the state. When I was a young Boy Scout, our troop headed south for a day hike on an 11-mile trail that was, as I remember it, relentless in going up and down every hill there was. As I said, it was a very hot day, and I found myself out of water several miles before the end of the hike. What I remember most from that hike was struggling up to the top of every hill, hoping to see some sign of the end, only to find yet another hill beyond it. And of course water was the only thing I could think about. The climb up each hill got slower than the last, and so our senior patrol leader came up with a brilliant plan to motivate us: he went a little ahead of us to scout out the trail, then came back excitedly shouting, “The end is just over the next ridge!” So of course we all ran down the hill we were on, ran up the next hill, and of course there we discovered that he was lying. Twenty years later, I’m still not sure I’ve forgiven him.

There’s nothing quite like being thirsty, especially when you’re really, seriously, maddeningly parched. We’ve all been there at some point. You want nothing more than some cold, clear water, something that we all take for granted all the time. And if I’m not careful, we’re going to need to take an intermission in the sermon so everyone can go get a drink. Water is a basic human need, and thirst is a basic part of the human experience. The only thing we need more urgently than water is air; we’re all only a matter of hours away from being insanely thirsty.

And that’s one of the reasons why today’s word from the cross is so significant. Thirst is so *human*. We can’t imagine God getting thirsty, because He’s God. It’s easier to imagine Jesus as one of us because we have all sorts of paintings of Him and movies about Him, but even so, He still comes across as being very divine, set apart, different. It can be hard to relate to Jesus sometimes because He always knows the answers and He can do incredible miracles, so even though He looks like one of us, it can be hard to think of Him *as* one of us.

But here we are, at the crucifixion, just a matter of moments before His death, and some of His last words are, “I’m thirsty.” Very human words. Very simple, understandable, relatable, not very profound words. We get those glimpses from time to time in the stories of Jesus’ life when He comes across as being very human — when He cries at the death of a friend, when He gets tired from His workload, when He gets a little short-tempered with His enemies — and it’s fitting that we get one of those moments here on the cross, because if there’s anything that shows that Jesus was one of us, it’s that He died. One of the things that marks us as being human rather than divine is that we’re mortal. We die, but God doesn’t.

In fact, as some of the early leaders of the church studied the life of Jesus, they took care to note when His actions seemed to be more “divine” or more “human.” For example, the famous shortest verse of the Bible, John 11:35, “Jesus wept,” was the sort of thing that they had a hard time imagining God doing; it’s a more “human” response. Or when Jesus got tired, they attributed that to His human nature. And likewise, when He performed some sort of miracle, that would be a more “divine” or “God-like” attribute.

In fact it took the church some time to come to settle on an understanding of the relationship between the divinity and the humanity of Jesus Christ. It's clear that there are some moments that He's more "God-like" and others when He's more obviously human, but is He half one and half the other? Is He just pretending or appearing to be one or the other? Is He some sort of unique being somewhere between God and humanity with some attributes of both, like an angel? The conclusion that the church reached in the year 431 was that He is both entirely God and entirely human: without diminishing the meaning of either divinity or humanity, without confusing them or mixing them in any way, the incarnate Christ brought our nature into union with God's nature within Himself. We don't really understand how that works or how to explain things much more simply than that, but we do affirm that in Jesus Christ exists both the fullness of divinity and the fullness of humanity. To suggest any sort of diminishment of either is to reject some part of how Jesus revealed Himself.

To start to get a grasp on what this means, it's helpful to think about the image of water in the story of Jesus' life. We could look at water in the entire Bible, because water is present and important in a lot of key moments in the history of God's work with humans — the waters of creation, the parted waters of the sea during the Exodus, the water of baptism, and many, many others — but even the story of Jesus illustrates it. In fact, even focusing only on John's account of Jesus' life is enough. Water, and discussions about water, keep popping up at spiritually significant points in the ministry of Jesus. The story in John's gospel begins with John the Baptizer, who meets Jesus and sees the Spirit of God resting on Jesus at the banks of the Jordan River. A few days later, Jesus' first miracle is to turn water into wine at a poorly-planned wedding. The next chapter, Jesus has a discussion with Nicodemus in which He speaks of being "born of water and the Spirit," referring to baptism. The next chapter, Jesus has a discussion with a woman of a different faith at the side of a well, where He tells her that "whoever drinks the water I give them *will never thirst*. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." The next chapter, Jesus encounters a paralyzed man who is waiting by a magic pool of water, but because the man can't get to the water quickly enough, he can't get healed — until Jesus, who has these streams of living water, heals him. A couple of chapters later, Jesus preaches this message: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." John tells us that this water Jesus is referring to is the Spirit of God.

So all through John's gospel, water keeps appearing and playing a role in the miracles and proclamation of Jesus. It's not one of the major themes of the gospel, but it's there just enough to catch our attention and make that connection between the ministry of Jesus and the presence of God. Maybe even more than the other gospel writers, John wants to leave no room for doubting that Jesus is God, and that through Him, God is present in our lives. But then there are those other hints, like this word of Jesus on the cross, that He's also human. We see that Jesus is both God and human.

Or, in other words, *God was thirsty*. Divinity and humanity. Being thirsty is common, normal stuff of human life. It's as ordinary and human as stubbing your toe or going to the bathroom. It's ordinary, that is, until *God* gets thirsty, at which point it has some huge implications. First, it tells us something about our relationship with God; second, it tells us something about God; and third, it tells us something about what we ought to be.

First, it tells us something about our relationship with God. It tells us that God became a human — really, truly, actually became a human — so that humans could come to God. He took the radical step of inviting us into His community, not by sending an invitation, but by moving into the house next door. Humanity was given a place at God's table, and He did this while we were still His enemies: we were such bad houseguests that rather than sitting down to dinner, we were throwing food and trying to burn the house down, but God still gave us a costly invitation. Many people claim it as a theological precept that God does not change, and He's the same yesterday, today, and forever. That's true in the sense that God's character does not change and God cannot be forced to change, but it's also true that with the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God *did* change: He took our humanity into union with His divine nature, He became one of us, and He invited us to become one in Him, too. It's an unimaginably deep, intimate relationship. God became a human so that humans could come to God.

That in turn tells us something about God. Specifically, it tells us about the character of His love for us. He is not only faithful to us, He is *sacrificially* faithful. God got *thirsty* for our sakes. I love the little clue that John inserts into this part of the crucifixion account: "knowing that everything had now been finished, and *so that Scripture would be fulfilled*, Jesus said, 'I am thirsty.'" John wants us to make a connection between this word from Jesus with earlier Scripture; it's not just that Jesus was literally thirsty. He doesn't seem to be directly quoting any one Scripture here, but the offering of gall and vinegar hearkens back to Psalm 69, which we read. It's a psalm very similar to what we read last week, as well as many other psalms, in which the psalmist is trying to be faithful to God but is being mercilessly persecuted and attacked by others. We need to make that connection that Jesus is a man of God, *the* Man of God, and His mission of faithfulness, love, and truth has led Him into conflict with those who unjustly accuse Him for their own gain. This is the common experience of those who follow Christ: we all have to trust Him fully, because we can't count on this world.

We have a God who is willing to go to such lengths for us, to empty Himself of all His glory and arrive as our unexpected savior, humbly and sacrificially giving Himself in love. He was willing to be cut off and scorned, cursed and ridiculed, doubted and rejected, in spite of His power and greatness. The one who is the source of the never-ending living water was willing to become thirsty for our sakes. He became a human so that humanity could come to Him.

And third, this tells us something about what we ought to be in response to His relationship with us and His love for us. God became human so that humans could come to God; His incarnation for us is the template for our response to Him. He shows us a life lived humbly: after all, God the Son set aside His glory, becoming like a servant, not counting equality with God something to be grasped onto, so that He could save us. We are called to likewise live humble lives of service to others. He shows us a life lived poured out, as He who was the source of living water became thirsty for our sakes. We, too, are called to empty ourselves and become desperate for God's Spirit, to set aside the lusts of this world, to be willing to humble ourselves for others' sakes, to ignore the scorn of those who reject God, and to become dependent on Him for the streams of living water that will never leave us thirsty again.

This simple, unimpressive word from the cross today calls us to a deep devotion in the one who gave Himself for us — He not only died for us, but He humbled Himself for us, He took our nature

upon Himself, He invited us into His family in spite of our failures and sins. Love like that should change us. It should give us a thirst to respond, a thirst that can only be quenched by Christ.



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