

“It Is Finished.”

*A meditation offered by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at The Three Hours service, April 6, 2012.*

Good Friday.

Based on John 19:29-30, 33-37.

When I do pre-marital work with couples who are getting married here at St. Bart's, one of the things we talk about is our natural, in-born personality preferences. It helps to develop awareness and understanding of those differences, and to learn how to deal with those differences with respect and creativity. Like our “handed-ness” preference (whether we're right-handed or left-handed) that seems to be built in when we're born, we seem to be “wired” with certain other preferences that affect how we live in the world and how we relate to each other.

So I ask each of the couples to take a short form of a widely used personality inventory. One of the things the inventory shows is someone's need for closure or for open-endedness: How strongly does someone need to come to closure, to make a decision and move on, to finish something? How comfortable is someone with open-endedness, with leaving things unresolved?

From my work with this over the years, I know myself to have a stronger preference for having things resolved, finished, completed. It physically feels good to me to have something done—a project completed, a problem resolved, the decision made. It felt good to have that seminary paper not only written, but also stapled and turned in and my copy neatly filed.

Clicking Send and closing the e-folder now doesn't give quite the same visceral satisfaction. I would imagine, if I could ever actually achieve this, that answering every last e-mail and achieving a perfectly empty Inbox might feel really wonderful. For the two minutes it would stay empty.

It feels physically uncomfortable to me to have things uncompleted or “hanging over me,” even when I know there is nothing at the moment I can do about them. Which is why it bothers me to have my office in disarray or my taxes not finished. Even though I know I can't do anything to change that situation for a while, it still feels uncomfortable.

But I have learned the value, and the necessity, of leaving some things open, unresolved, at least for a while, open to new possibilities, even—dare I say it—to the working of God's grace. Sometimes it really is better not to send that e-mail, realizing the situation will benefit from some “cooling off” time. Or that I need to do my own personal homework before replying. Or that the greater good is served by my not making a quick reply.

In some cases, trying to achieve completion or resolution is not possible or even advisable. A child, or an adult, growing into the person God is creating them to be: who knows what is emerging? A couple courageously learning new behaviors in order to strengthen—or save—their

marriage. A church determined to stay faithful to its mission while at the same time learning new ways of being church in our rapidly changing culture. The mistakes and successes along the way are part of that process.

Whichever way we may be “wired,” I’m guessing each of us knows what it feels like to have completed something, to know we’ve given everything that we have to it. It feels especially satisfying when the result is wonderful, and all our effort is noticed and appreciated. A fabulous dinner party. Or a simple supper where all our guests leave feeling not only fed but nourished and more strongly connected than when they arrived. A piece of music, whether complex or simple, practiced and practiced, performed but also offered, not only technically brilliant, but with heart and soul that moves the souls of others. The gut-renovation of a kitchen, or a whole apartment, which seems at times to threaten the end of sanity, bank account, relationship, or all of the above; but when completed, is so beautiful and so enjoyed that the pain and anguish fade quickly, much like the pain of childbirth. I don’t know what to say about the Second Avenue subway.

Sometimes we are very glad to have something finished, completed, behind us. We’re done here. Last year was awful; I’m glad it’s over; I’m very happy to see this new year. That’s history. We’re moving on.

Sometimes things get completed, finished, in a time or way that is not of our choosing. It’s over—we’re finished. I want a divorce. Even when we know it is for the best, it can still hurt—a lot. Your job has been eliminated. A car crashes.

Sometimes what we’ve worked so hard on and put all of our whole self into is completed, but not recognized or valued, or appears to be an utter failure, and that hurts, too. The rejection letter from the publisher ... or from a number of publishers. The non-response to the many job applications, despite excellent credentials and solid experience. The well-deserved promotion that doesn’t happen, or goes to someone else.

These day-to-day completions of our lives, whether intentional or not, whether celebrated or grieved or ignored, become part of the fabric of our life. They shape us as much as we shape them. These day-to-day completions are part of our life, but they are not our whole life. When we get to the end of our earthly life—and we will all get there at some point—how will we feel about the shape our life has taken? What sense will we have that we have fulfilled what we were meant to do, what we were created to do?

When John’s Jesus says from the cross, “It is finished,” he offers as his last words a public statement that he has completed his mission. He has had his successes and his failures, just like any of us humans. But he has lived fully the life God gave him to live. He has completed the work God gave him to do.

Jesus’ work was not the finishing of a task or a project, even a complex long-term project over many years. Rather, it is the completion of the work Jesus and God have been doing together, and for which Jesus was sent into this world. He was sent to reveal, in the most

powerful way possible—by human experience—the fullness of God’s love for this world and for each of us.

By his life and all that he did, Jesus revealed the love of God. In his death, particularly as John writes it, Jesus chooses to give up what we humans hold most dear: life. Jesus’ gift of his life on the cross is the ultimate gesture of generosity and grace—not required, but offered freely, so that we, some 2,000 years later, may understand the full extent of God’s love for the world. [Gail R. O’Day, *The Gospel of John*, p. 837, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 1995]

It can take us a lifetime to fathom that love. Or it can take an instant.

Jesus’ death was the completion of his earthly life and work, but it was not the end. From his death, like the blood and water that flow from his side, new life begins.

The completion of our earthly life and work, however and whenever that happens, isn't the end, either.

God isn't finished with any of us yet.

Amen.