

INTO YOUR HANDS

GOOD FRIDAY¹

ST. JOHN LUTHERAN CHURCH, BROOKLYN

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

MARCH 25, 2005

A SERMON BY NEIL O'FARRELL, PASTOR

*Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit.
It is finished.*

There, there my Son: See ... now it's all over. You've commended to me your spirit, but in fact, I held you in the palm of my hand during your entire life's journey. Your spirit is but returning to where it came from: to the loving arms of Abba, to me your Father, the loving creator and embodiment of mother-love and father-love to all of my children.

Yours was not to be an easy life. I knew that when you were knit before time began. You were on a collision course with fate—with sin, with evil, with happenstance, with wayward human wills that were less than they could have been.

Into my hands you've commended your spirit. But you see, we were all together as one. I was beside you in your mother's womb. I was there when you learned to walk and talk. I was there when you played, and I was there when your natural boisterousness got you in trouble with Mary and Joseph and your neighbors. I had to smile when you told your parents with such seriousness when they found you in the Temple after searching for you for several days—it felt an eternity to them because you were their lost child—you were so serious when you told them, “Did you not know that I needed to be about my Father's business? ...” They understood and didn't understand, and really, all they wanted was to take you back home with them. Your mother filed this event away with all of her other pondered recollections, mulling them over in her mind and heart, worrying about you, what would happen to you, what you were to become, whether the world would treat you well or harshly.

Well, your Father's business was to heal the festering scar that had torn the cosmos, that always felt like an unbridgeable distance between the people and their God. But I was always there, always alongside them, always alongside you.

Yes, yes, now your spirit can return to where it's never left, to the place it has always been, to the loving God that dwelt within you, that dwells within all my children. It was always so bemusing to me that I have been called “all wise” and “omniscient.” I had long looked for another way, but finally I realized that there was no other way than your going down, no other way than your becoming fully human. There was just no other way for us—God linked with humanity.

¹ Good Friday: Isaiah 52:12–53:12; Psalm 22; Hebrews 10:16–25; John 18:1–19:42; this sermon was repeated from the Good Friday 2004 text.

My Son, my beloved child of God: we both suffered. You were never away from me. I, too, felt the lash, the violence of the nails, the splinters of the cross, the humiliation of being stripped and mocked. I, too, thirsted.

It wasn't easy for you; I know that. You so often felt alone, frustrated. I'm glad that you were able to eke some enjoyment out of your time on earth. You genuinely seemed to have fun, to enjoy the companionship of your friends and followers. I've always delighted that your first sign was changing water into wine; the "up-tight bunch" have always had some trouble with that one, not realizing that our message was one of life, joy, and fullness of spirit. No, it was never easy for you, and when it became too much, you always tried to slip away, to take a long walk, to converse with me about what you were feeling, what you were thinking, wondering where it would ultimately lead, wondering where it would ultimately ... end.

My son, my son ... you called out to me, "My God, my God ..." We both knew this would be hard, but I'm not sure that either of us knew how hard. In truth, just as you were knit before time began—before time began, we were afraid it would inevitably come to this—your hanging on the cross on that bleak stone outcropping, that spring afternoon when the air was not quite cold like winter, not quite warm like summer.

Once the events were put in motion — well, you just went with them. Oh, the look on the faces of those thieves and miscreants in the Temple when you wrecked their moneychangers' tables. You couldn't help yourself: you couldn't abide the desecration of your Father's house—our house. I know you never thought you'd do something like that until in the very moment you saw how wrong it was and then tried to do something about it. You were so rightfully, rageously angry.

You always seemed to know you were on a mission, even if it took you some times awhile to figure things out. That insistent foreign woman ... she sure gave you a piece of her mind when you compared her hungry children to the dogs, when she was just asking you to heal her sick daughter. I think that was the first time when your more human side understood the vastness of our mission. But your spirit was so large, it didn't matter: your spirit, *our* spirit, was always large enough to accommodate even a mission as vast and eternal as was yours. You were a quick study, and you always allowed your heart to lead the way.

Your big heart — that is what touched so many people. It was your heart that cured the ones who came to you — halt, broken, blind, disease-ridden, despairing. Your heart that always forgave the unforgiven, and then while you hung on the cross, forgave that which was almost unforgivable. Your big heart ... Healing the blind, you wanted people to have large visions. Healing the broken, you wanted to make the broken whole. Healing their diseases, you wanted them to see that their fleshly physical travails, as much as they rend and tear the spirit, the spirit is always larger than any trouble they might experience. And the despairing: you wanted to transform them with hope.

And you taught them to pray. You gave them permission, encouragement to pray to their Abba, Father. If anyone had missed the point, that is how you prayed to me in your last hours: Father, forgive them ... Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. Always ... Father. Personal, intimate, trusting, intoxicated with love.

So, here is the moment; now is the time. Of course, I will take your spirit up into my loving arms. That was your last lesson, one of the best lessons. You taught them that their spirits are never lost and alone. Their spirits never need to be bereft of hope. Just as you and I were always one, all of them—those human beings who live their lives in wonder and woe—they are one with each other, and they are one with their God because their God lives in them just as surely as the Father lived in the Son, and the Son lived in the Father.

It came down to this on that dreary landscape that was Israel's killing field. Everything is one: a unity, a wholeness. You healed the breach of time and space.

Be quiet now. It's all over ... for now. But it's never over. What began so long ago has gotten a new start. For behold, I, your loving Father, make all things new. Be quiet now ... you have achieved the peace you promised to others, and now have won for yourself.

Come to me, my child, you who have been so burdened. In me, you will find your rest.

© 2004: Cornelius O'Farrell, Baltimore, MD