

It Is Finished

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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John 19:30

It is Finished. That phrase can have very different connotations. Often when you hear the phrase it communicates defeat and resignation. On election night, the politician looks at the vote count and realizes that he's going to lose. He hangs his head. "It's finished," he says. The young man sits in the corner of the bar. His face is downcast and his friend comes over to ask him what's wrong. My girlfriend just told me she doesn't want to see me anymore. It's over. It's finished." That's often the sense of the word: Finished in the sense of, "That's it, there's no more, end of story."

When Jesus says, "It is finished!" from the cross, this is not the sense of the word he has in mind. I wonder if some of his tormentors might have heard it that way as he hung his head and said It is finished, I can imagine that some of them heard it as a declaration of defeat. But that's not what it was. It was the opposite of that. Jesus doesn't speak these words as a sign of defeat; for Jesus, these are words of victory. More precisely, Jesus says these words in the spirit of a man who has completed his work, who has finished the job.

Honestly, the whole gospel of John has been leading up to these words. You see, through the whole gospel Jesus has been about his Father's business. He's been driving himself to finish that work. It's bad enough that in chapter 4:34, Jesus' disciples are urging him to take a break. "Stop driving so hard, eat something!" they say. But Jesus replies, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." (The word finish here is the same Greek word as in our passage.) In chapter 5 Jesus again talks about the work that the Father has given him to complete, the work God has given him to finish. His sense of mission shows up in the things he says throughout the gospel: "I must drink the cup the Father has given me. I am going ahead of you to prepare a place. I will be lifted up to die and the prince of this world will be driven out!" Read John and you see a driven man, hard at work. Jesus is a man on a mission.

And in John 19:30 his work is finally done! And so Jesus says, "It is finished!" Evil defeated! Sins forgiven! Mission accomplished! World saved! So today, when we hear Jesus shout "It is finished," We can raise our fists and tell each other that Jesus has overcome the world and its troubles. Today and every Sunday we get together and we raise our fist and say "It is finished! We are saved, forgiven and victorious!!!"

But here is where the questions come in. Jesus may say "It is finished!" and we may raise our fists and say, "Jesus has won!" But is this really how life feels? Isn't life so terribly unfinished? I don't know about you, but unfinished business is my daily reality. I walk into my office in the morning and on my desk there are piles. Stacks of papers and books and letters and old bulletins. Each of these piles are a physical reminder of unfinished work: Things that I promised to get done but haven't finished yet, details I still need to take care of, or at the very least, filing that I haven't got round to. I open my office door and my desk says to me, "It is unfinished."

On my nightstand at home there is a pile of books that have a bookmark in them somewhere in the middle; usually at the beginning middle. And my bookshelves at home and at work there are many impressive looking books that I feel as though I should read, but haven't even started. All these books say to me, "It is unfinished."

When I walk around my house, I see projects I need to do. Painting, chores, stuff that needs fixing. Our fourth bedroom needs a final coat of paint, and I haven't done that yet. The gate to our backyard fence has a loose board and every time I go through it, I think, "I need to fix that!" My garage door opener doesn't close when the light is on; have to figure that out. When I walk around my house there are things that seem to say to me, "It is unfinished." This is life, right? I know this isn't just me. We are all surrounded by unfinished business.

The unfinished business I just mentioned is minor stuff. The world will not end because of piles in the office and half read books. And yet these little bits of unfinished business that surround us can be really aggravating, can't they? Piles in the office, piles of laundry at home, these things can really make us irritable. And the reason they aggravate us so much is that when these small things say to us, "It is unfinished," they

remind us of all the larger unfinished business of this world. The reason a parent comes home and feels furious because the kids haven't put away their toys, is that these domestic imperfections remind us of all the parts of the world that are terribly and tragically unfinished.

Jesus may have said "It is finished! The enemy is defeated!!" But we still watch wars grind on. We still count refugees in the millions. We still see tension and dysfunction in our political system. We still see the street outside our church doors filled with desperate people. And the rooms at DeVos children's hospital are still full of patients. Whether we are looking at our laundry pile or watching the world news, everywhere we turn we hear reality say to us, "It is unfinished."

Robert Frost's most famous poem is *Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening*. It's a poem about unfinished business. It tells the story of a man stopping with his horse in the middle of a New Hampshire Woods. He stands between the woods and a frozen lake in the darkness watching the woods fill up with snow. It is completely quiet and beautiful. Frost's poem gives you the sensation of momentary calm. But then comes Frost's last stanza, the one you remember: "The woods are lovely dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep." What heartbreaking words those are. Miles to go before we sleep. People resonate with that last stanza. That last stanza makes the poem great. It quietly reminds us of all that is left to be done. It reminds us of never ending duties and obligations and crises. It quietly tells us the hard truth: in so many places and so many ways, 'unfinished' seems like the story of our lives.

But above all this, with his arms extended, stands Jesus. And he wants to suggest a different story for our lives. He says, "It is Finished! It is completed! Don't worry! Don't despair! It is all taken care of!" It's just what we want to hear, it's just what we need to hear; but is it real! How on earth do we make this fit with the overwhelming unfinished-ness of everything else in our world?!!

Perhaps it would help if we went back to the meaning of finished again. When Jesus says, "It is finished," he doesn't mean to say that everything is perfect now. When you're painting a room in your house you set your sights on finishing the job. You clean the walls, you put joint compound over all the holes and imperfections, you sand the walls, you prime the walls you cut in the edges, you roll the middle, you clean your brushes you vacuum the dust, you move the furniture back in place, and then finally, having completed the work your wife has given you to do, you raise your arms in triumph. "It is finished!" And when you say it is finished you mean, "It is completely done! It's perfect!" That's not how Jesus means finished here. Jesus means finished here in the sense that we speak of a courtship being finished on a wedding day. Jesus means finished here in the sense that graduates talk about being finished on the day of their graduation. The work is done. There is cause to celebrate. But there are more adventures ahead.

Let me try to explain how Jesus means 'It is finished' using an analogy from NT Wright, the British theologian. Wright says that the history of God's people is like a book that God has written and is writing, a book with 8 chapters. Most of that book is done. We have the first six chapters of that play. Those are the books and stories and wisdom of the Old Testament along with the stories of Jesus in the gospels and the letters of Paul. It's a wild and wonderful story of struggle and hope and promises.

Not only do we have the first 6 chapters of the book, we also have chapter 8. We have the ending. We can flip to the end of our book and see how things turn out. In the last chapter we see that God has triumphed. The devil is beaten, and everything is new! The streams flow with clean water the trees burst with good fruit. The new creation is established and life is full and free and forever. In this last act, if we look hard, we can even see ourselves renewed, all the broken and unfinished parts of us are gone. All the uncertainty is gone. In the last act you are so full of life you look great! When Jesus says, 'It is finished,' it is this last act that he's talking about. When Jesus says 'It is finished!' he's put the period at the end of the last sentence of this final chapter. When Jesus says 'It is finished,' he's saying that the story's good ending is assured.

But that means there's one chapter of the book that hasn't been written yet, or to put it in good Calvinist terms, that we don't know it yet, and that's the chapter we're in right now. We are living in the middle of chapter 7. We don't know how it will unfold. From our perspective it is unfinished. We are participants in this chapter. As we work out our salvation with fear and trembling, we are helping to finish this chapter in the story. Every day of our lives we enter into God's great story and we help bring it to its conclusion. It's not an easy chapter, this one we're writing. It's a tough part of the book. A lot of tears and conflict. I think the church thought it might be an easy part of the story, a short sweet period where the church marched from victory to

victory, the world got better and better, and Jesus just came back. But it's turned out to be a chapter full of conflict and now we kind of expect this part of the story to be hard. But still...we know how the play will end! Jesus said, "It is finished" so we know that grace will triumph and Jesus will be all in all. And that changes everything.

Here's a way to think about how knowing the last chapter changes the Spirit of our life. Perhaps the ultimate symbol of what's unfinished in life is the 'to do' list. We all structure our day around what we have to do that day. Some of us get up in the morning and physically write down a list. Others are more high tech and they have it all on their phone. Some of us just keep a mental list that we churn through during our morning shower. When you think about it, these lists are a litany of unfinished business. These lists are a reminder of what is unfinished in our life. They are kind of a daily liturgy of what's lacking. When you put a to do list at the center of your life, you are centering your life around all that is unfinished and incomplete. Don't get me wrong...To do lists are a necessary part of life. I don't recommend trying to give up on them.

But I wonder if Jesus' word from the cross suggests to us a different center for our life, a different order of things, a different liturgy for our days. Jesus has said "It is finished," so now maybe, instead of starting with our 'to do' list, we have the opportunity to start with what is done. As Christians we can center our lives, not on our to do list, but on our 'done' list. The done list is a pretty great list. Love surrounding you on every side? Done. Grace and mercy poured out on you every morning? Done. A creation which despite all its hurt still shines with the joy and the beauty of God? Done. The removal of all your past sins and failures? Done. A promise that you will become the person you are meant to be? Done. The end of every stupid and unjust conflict? Done. Reconciliation with that person you love? Done. All your doubts replaced by faith? Done. A day when you will see the God you've worshipped your whole life and you finally see him smile and finally hear him speak your name? Done! Done! Done! It is finished! It is done!

Our 'to do' lists can seem pretty overwhelming. When you begin your week thinking about all the unfinished business that lies ahead, you can find yourself saying, "how can I possibly manage!" So let us start our week by reminding ourselves that our 'to-do' list has nothing on God's 'done' list. Because when you are able to begin your day with the grace of what has been done for you, when you begin your day with Jesus stretching his arms over all your duties and responsibilities and saying, "It IS finished," that's maybe just the strength and grace you need to get up, and do what you need to do.

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