

April 3, 2015, Good Friday  
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John 18:1-19:42

## Good Friday

“It is finished.” A busy week. Lent. Winter should be, too. “It is finished.” A long, long gospel story of betrayal and brutality. “It is finished.” Jesus’ final words from the cross, from the gospel of John, on Good Friday. What makes it good? Why would we ever call such a story, such a day, good?

Or, to press it even further, perfect? Because that’s what Jesus says from the cross. Not just “It is finished,” but “It is perfected.” The word that Jesus uses has a much vaster sense than just “It’s over. It’s done. The end.” The word that Jesus uses, a form of the word “telos,” announces accomplishment, fulfillment, even, triumph. It’s a word that signals ending, yes, but ending in the sense also of having an end, having a purpose, coming to completion. This passion, this suffering, this death on a cross—what about it makes Jesus say, “It is perfected”?

The perfection that Jesus announces is not the kind of perfection that permeates the air we breathe, the images and aspirations and appetites all around us: the perfect body, the perfect school, the perfect job, the perfect vacation from a job. I think the perfect we usually encounter sounds like something we might achieve: a perfect test score, or something that we might be: the perfect wife. Perfection comes by our own exertion. Practice makes perfect. Or if not by practice, by purchase, perfection as something you can buy: the perfect house, the perfect complexion. Perfection, meaning flawless, and painless. Ideas about, and images of, and desires for perfection are all around us, but they don’t look like a dying man, hanging from a cross.

God has a different definition of perfection, a perfection that God proclaims to us, and models for us, and gives to us. This is perfection, God says: love to the end. Total love, complete love—with all the vulnerability and sacrifice that love entails. This is what perfection includes: pain and suffering. This is what perfection looks like: God’s arms stretched wide. Full. Total. Complete. Telos.

Jesus uses this word at other points in John’s gospel. Just hours before Jesus’ arrest, as he is gathered with his disciples in an upper room, he does a startling, tender act: he washes their feet, an example of service and servant leadership. That cross-foreshadowing example, that story of foot washing begins with this introduction: “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.” It’s the same word as the one from the cross, telos. He loved them, not just to the end, but to completion, to perfection.

After washing their feet, and sharing a meal, knowing that he was about to be betrayed, knowing that he is about to suffer and die, Jesus prays for the disciples, a long prayer in John’s gospel. In it, Jesus uses this same word again, and again, this word about perfection, telos. He says he has completed, perfected God’s work, and he prays that his disciples, that we, may be completely one, that we may be perfected into one.

On the cross, God answers that prayer, for us. In Jesus, God says that we are free from the world’s ideas of perfection, free from images and ideas and vain attempts that pull us in, like moths to an artificial light. We are free from those things that actually would pin us down, like dead bugs in a glass box, for perfection is not something we can earn, or do, or buy, it is something we are offered, freely: a new and beautiful existence, free from cocoons of sin and death.

“You shall be perfect,” Jesus says, “as my Heavenly Father is perfect.” It is not a demand, but a gift, grace, something God accomplishes, “You shall be perfect,” for “It is perfected.”