### “I Commend My Spirit” Steve Finlan for The First Church, April 13, 2025

**Luke 23:32, 39–49**

32 Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him . . . 38There was also an inscription over him, “This is the King of the Jews.”

39 One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, “Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!” 40But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? 41And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.” 42Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” 43He replied, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

44 It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, 45while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. 46Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” Having said this, he breathed his last. 47When the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God and said, “Certainly this man was innocent.” 48And when all the crowds who had gathered there for this spectacle saw what had taken place, they returned home, beating their breasts. 49But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.

Have you ever noticed that some people have a certain characteristic that manifests in all circumstances? Here we have an example of Jesus’ mercy showing through at all times.

Palm Sunday is when we commemorate Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and also the passion and death itself. In today’s Scripture, we see that Jesus shows his mercy, even from the cross. One thief saw something in Jesus. Did he see Jesus’ noble and decent character? Did he respect Jesus’ courage and dignity? Did he recognize Jesus as a prophet or a healer? We don’t know exactly what he saw in Jesus or how much he understood, but it was enough for him to ask Jesus to remember him. And *that* was enough for Jesus to save him, and promise to take him to heaven with him. This guy had no training or instruction, but he saw something of eternal value in Jesus, and it had eternal implications for him.

The other thief embodies the scornful and short-sighted attitude that we see so often in atheists and sensualists who just don’t care about anything spiritual. These are the ones often referred to in the Old Testament as “scoffers.” Unfortunately some of the nation’s most respected rabbis and teachers turned out to be scoffers, as well. Were they secretly atheists? God knows. It seems possible. Even the high priest, Caiaphas, and the retired former high priest, Annas, participated in the plot to do Jesus in. When the truth is seen, they were less perceptive and less worthy than a thief who had been condemned to death. What percentage of people will be saved? There’s no way we can know, and we don’t need to know. This story simply shows us that one person will choose to be saved, while another will not. There seem always to be both kinds of people. We get to choose which we will be.

Darkness came over the land from noon to three, it says, and the curtain of the temple was torn in two, perhaps signifying that the way to God was now opened up. No one but the high priest was allowed to go past that curtain into the Most Holy Place, and even he only once a year, on the Day of Atonement. But now the curtain is torn. It might mean that anyone can approach God now. The barriers are down. Maybe even someone like the centurion could get in. He recognized, in the Son of Man’s behavior, his innocence.

Jesus, as he’s approaching death, commends his spirit into the Father’s hands. *What* exactly was he commending? Was he entrusting his soul to the Father’s care, just as any mortal might do? Was he entrusting something of his divine-human life to God, for eternal preservation? We don’t know, but it sounds important, something that God would preserve. At the very least, it was an act of profound trust, on Jesus’ part.

He knew that his enemies were going to get him killed. He foretold it to the apostles several times, so as to ready them for the traumatic experience. In Luke 18 he foretold that he would be mistreated, killed, and would rise again on the third day (Luke18:33). But we don’t know exactly what spiritual quality he was handing over to God. It may be beyond our ability to know.

In some ways, Jesus’ relationship to God was like ours, and we know something about the human level. He was a mortal, capable of dying, and needing to trust in God’s guiding hand. In other ways his relationship was different from ours, inasmuch as he was so close to the Father, spiritually and personally. There are aspects of his relationship to God that we, who are *only* mortal and not divine, cannot understand.

But we can certainly study the devotion of the human Jesus. At one point he described doing God’s will as his food (John 4:32, 34). That’s how close to his heart was the motive of doing God’s will; he took it into himself like taking in food. He always prayed that God’s will be done (Matt 6:10; 26:42). And he really knew, not just as an idea but with a certainty, that “your father knows what you need before you ask him,” and that “your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt 6:8, 18). These were part of his prayer experience. Every day Jesus experienced the faithfulness and generosity of God. Even his enemies, the chief priests, noted “He trusts in God” (Matt 27:43).

The writer and editor Michelle Hicks tells a story about *her* trust in God. She was driving her friends, chatting and laughing, when then there was a loud boom and she felt her body pressed back into the seat. A car had just pulled out in front of her and she couldn’t avoid hitting it. Her car lost control, and the airbags deployed. She didn’t know if this was the end or not, but she knew she had to trust God. Words from Philippians came to her mind: “The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:7). She felt that peace and knew that Jesus was with her. Her car ended up between a tree and an electrical pole, and no one in the car was hurt. From this experience, Michelle developed five points about trusting God: trust God through the good and the bad, learn from God through all experiences, trust even when there are no answers, trust with humility, and trust God with the impossible. No matter what, God will demonstrate His power through her, she says (women.lifeway.com/2021/11/02/stories-of-faith-learning-to-trust-god/).

Jesus also developed principles out of his life experience. One of these was “search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you” (Matt 7:7). He saw God’s providing of our spiritual needs as similar to the sun shining on the fields, raising up lilies and clothing them with beauty (Matt 6:28–29). He wanted us to know about the life everlasting, the final triumph over death. He told us to work “for the food that endures for eternal life” (John 6:27). Even though the physical body will die, those who have faith will “never perish” (John 10:28).

We are on our spiritual journey—just beginning to learn about our Father, and about our father-brother, Jesus. We can trust that God’s mercy and kindness are there for the asking. Death has lost its sting when we are in the arms of the divine mercy.