A few years ago on a Good Friday morning there was a battle taking place.....the classic battle between parents and a teenager. This particular battle took place in the family home and centered around who was going to the Good Friday service that day. As you can probably guess, the parents wanted their 15 year old daughter to go to church, and the daughter, of course, did not want to go. The daughter could be heard protesting, “why should I go.....why would anyone want to go to this service.....what’s so good about Good Friday......it’s all so depressing......all this talk about death and suffering, the nails and the blood!” In an attempt to appease her parents the daughter said, “I’ll go to the Easter Sunday service with you when the mood is so much better and brighter.” This maneuver didn’t work on the parents at all as the mom said in the firmest voice she could muster, “I don’t want to hear any more of this kind of talk.....you are coming to church with us today, and that’s final!”

The final three words that the mother spoke to the daughter reminds me of another story told to us by a seminary professor. A pastor had the idea to put some red paint on the wooden cross that they used at Good Friday services to represent the blood of Christ. The chair of that church’s council didn’t really like that idea and she let the pastor know what her feelings were. She said, “this is a church service not a wrestling match.” The pastor tried and tried to make his point understood but the council chair was not going to have any of it. She ended the conversation by saying, “pastor, you know I think you are a great pastor and we are lucky to have you here with us, but there will be no red paint on that wooden cross.....and that’s final!”

Unfortunately, some preachers don’t really talk about the ugliness of Good Friday or the pain and the suffering that Jesus experienced that day. The church in general often denies the
crucifixion of Jesus by not preaching it, by withholding it, by being apologetic about it and by
dancing around the brutality of what actually happened to Jesus on the day that he was crucified
and died. We need to not only hear what happened to him, we need to think about it and let it
enter our hearts. As difficult as this may be, we need to fight through the disgust that we share
with the teenaged daughter…..we need to reflect upon the depressing, painfulness of Good
Friday. Why, you may ask? Because if we water-down the crucifixion we also water-down the
resurrection. In order to get the full measure of how much God loves us, we need to enter fully
into the details of Good Friday. I like to use the image of a prairie spring time. We who live in
this part of the world look so much forward to spring because of the long winter that we have
gone through. Without living through a difficult winter, spring time would just be another
season.

The Roman means of execution was crucifixion. The Romans were professionals at
crucifixions; they did them by the thousands, and recorded the details of their executions in their
history books. On the other hand, the Jewish people killed by stoning. Jesus was sentenced to
die by the Roman courts, therefore he was sentenced to die by crucifixion outside the city walls
of Jerusalem. One more crucifixion wouldn’t bother the soldiers. It was all in a day’s work for
them.

Therefore, as happened at other Roman crucifixions, the Roman soldiers whipped Jesus.
We know from history books that those crucified received thirty-nine lashes across their backs. If
you can imagine a man’s back that has been whipped or lashed thirty nine times, it is not a pretty
sight. Jesus was then given a long wooden bar, about six feet long, that he was given to carry to
Golgotha. The vertical post was stuck in the ground waiting for Jesus at the site. The person
being executed would carry the six-foot board which would be attached to the top of the vertical wooden pole stuck in the ground to form the cross. It was about a ten-minute walk from the place where Jesus was sentenced to the Place of the Skull outside the city wall. It was a ten-minute walk if there were no crowds, but on that day, the crowds were crushing against one another as a badly whipped Jesus slowly carried that top piece of the cross to the place of his execution. Jesus was so exhausted by the pain that Simon of Cyrene was picked from the crowd to carry the cross-piece for him.

And while Jesus painfully walked to his death, with a crown of thorns on his head and his purple robe wrapped around him, he was being mocked, spit on, struck and cursed at. And we can use our imaginations to see that the lashes that he received and the times he was struck were even more forceful that usual because this man was much talked about and there was something special about him. This troublemaker was not only being crucified, he was being publically humiliated as well. We can imagine the soldiers and the people in the crowd being extra nasty on this occasion. The humiliation continued as they placed an inscription on the cross saying, “King of the Jews.” The humiliation continued further as they stripped him naked before they tied him to the cross and drove the nails through his wrists and feet into the wood.

And it is important to dispel a fairly common thought at this point. There are some people out there, perhaps that 15 year old teenager, who like to soften all of what you have just heard by saying that, “Jesus was the Son of God…..he probably didn’t even feel anything like we would have.” To this kind of thinking I say, “no.” Not a chance. Yes, Jesus is equal parts divine and human, but through all of this suffering and nastiness he was completely human. And for the author of the book of John, the words, “I am thirsty” revealed Jesus’ humanity. Jesus’
tongue was swollen, the roof of his mouth was like sand and his throat was crusty dry. He was flesh and blood.....he was tested in all points as we are. He went before us. He knows what it is like to be a human being, to be in a crowd, and yet feel lonely.....he knows how it is to feel forsaken by loved ones. God knows what we face....all the worries, the sadness, the pain, the fears, the aggravations, the pressures, the stress.....and yes, the thirst. Because of the life of Jesus, including Good Friday, God knows it all. And knowing, God understands and judges mercifully.

On this day of Good Friday we stress Jesus’ humanity. On this day we don’t hide from what he went through for each and every one of us. On this day, we focus on his words from the cross.....“I am thirsty.” And we also focus on what he said right afterwards. The last words of the Lord in John’s memory are, “it is finished.” A short and simple phrase like, “the end” at the conclusion of a movie. But John and all the gospel writers make one thing perfectly clear. The last words of Jesus were not spoken in gasping resignation and defeat. They were not the words of a man dying without a cause. These simple words carry the same force as a mother who sings when her child is born and the pain of birth is gone and the sweet joy has come. “It is finished” was the signal from the Savior that salvation is assured. All he came to do is surely done. “It is finished!” The word in all of it’s parts is now fulfilled. In John’s view, these words of Christ were spoken in triumph from the cross and were meant to be his signal of victory to the entire world and to everyone. “It is finished.” Your sins are forgiven. And that’s final! Thanks be to God. Amen.