

The Cross at the Center of Seattle

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1. The Center

On this day, which we call “good,” let us begin by getting here, being here, staying here. Let us get here to Seattle, to this cathedral, to the cross, to our God. When we call this day “Good Friday,” we are using the old English word “good,” as in “good bye,” which we know really means “God be with you.” So when we say “Good Friday,” we know it is “good,” but what we are really saying is “God Friday.” Let’s begin by getting here to Seattle, to this cathedral, to the cross, to God. Then let us be here and stay here. That will be good.

In the Alban Hills outside of Rome I once had a conversation with a Trappistine nun named “Suor Virginia,” that is Sister Virginia. She was a beautiful, bright, joyful, young Italian woman of about 35. She wore the rough Trappist habit. She was in charge of formation in her community. She had lived for a dozen years in her enclosed monastery in those hills. I happened to ask her how she had come to choose this unusual way of life. Suor Virginia told me that she came from a fairly wealthy family. Her all-consuming desire when she was in her early twenties was to travel, to see the whole world, to go everywhere. She was in fact able to travel to all continents, but it never satisfied her. Then it dawned on her in a moment of grace, which was the moment of her vocation, that the only way she could be everywhere and see everything was to be in one place, to remain there and be deeply rooted there. Only by being in one place – in her case as an enclosed contemplative nun in a monastery in the Alban Hills – could Suor Virginia satisfy her desire to be everywhere. For her to be only there meant to be in God, to be at the center of her life, to be everywhere. We too can be there at the center on this “God Friday.”

But where is the center of the world? Is it Jerusalem, Rome, New York, Beijing? No, the center of the world is here in Seattle, in this cathedral, under this dome, delineated by the circle around this altar and the four directions, East, West, North and South, that radiate from it. Let me explain.

There was a time when some one place could claim to be the center of the world. That time ended in the death of Jesus upon the cross. His death made of the cross the tree of life planted in the middle of all time and at the heart of all extension. Wherever that tree of life is rooted is the center of the world, even the center of life. It is rooted above all where the Christian people gather in faith, in community. Gathered this day and facing toward a center, looking in faith and prayer upon the altar and cross, we are at the center of the world, in this cathedral in the heart of Seattle.

As with Suor Virginia, the only way to be everywhere is for us to be in one place and to stay put there, to be rooted there. Where God, as it were, “comes to ground,” takes root in our world, in our human soil, is in the death of Jesus on the cross. By resurrection, ascension, and pouring out of the spirit, that place is not a rocky hill, called Golgotha, outside Jerusalem. It is transplanted into the Christian assembly gathered around the altar in faith. Here is the true center of the world, here where God comes to ground, takes root, and becomes the tree of life. The only place to be in order to be everywhere, is here at the cross, the center of the world, and especially to be here on God Friday.

We are here to listen to the words of Jesus dying upon the cross. It is amazing that the God of all graciousness, the God of all spaciousness, was pinned down, nailed to the planks of wood which were dropped into a hole in the ground on the top of a hill. The God who cannot be contained, the God beyond all boundaries, the expansive, all-present God is trapped, confined, planted, pinned. In his dying, nailed upon the cross, unable to escape, hanging for hours suspended, Jesus becomes, as it were, “the God who can be got at.” Indeed he can be got at by us, he can’t escape, can’t escape us. He can’t move. All he can do is speak. His words are the words of God when God is, as it were, pinned down.

Of course the first word is “Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.” It is the first word of God to us when God is pinned down and wants to speak not so much his mind as his heart. Of course he starts with forgiveness, just as our Christian lives in baptism and our being assembled for Eucharist start in God’s forgiveness of us. When the God who can be got at speaks from his heart to us, speaks from the center of the world to the whole world, his first words are:

- Forgive them for they know not what they do.
- Forgive them for they know not what they live.
- Forgive them for they know not how they are loved.
- Forgive them for they know not who I am.
- Forgive them for they know not who they are.
- Forgive them for they know not their brothers and sisters.
- Forgive them their sins, yes, but forgive them for they know not that they sin.

The first word from the God who is pinned down, who can be got at, and who speaks, is forgive, forgive, forgive. We can’t come to and be at the center of the world unless we can hear this word, unless we need it, unless we know it needs to come from God. It is not only the first of the seven words of Jesus from the cross; it is also one-seventh of the entire text of the gospels of Jesus.

It is this word of forgiveness that gets us here, that makes this both a Good Friday and a God Friday, brings us to the tree of life in the center of the world. It is completely irrational, crazy, illogical, unreasonable for Jesus when pinned down, not only to say but to start by saying, “Father forgive.” He asks for no reasons from us why he should forgive. He just forgives. Forgiveness does not make sense; it is not done for reasons; it is not natural; not human. You see, that’s it; it’s none of these; it is godly. It is the first thing that comes from the God who is pinned down, the God who can be got at. There is nothing more to be said about it except “Hear it! Hear this crazy word from the crucified God addressed to you!

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Squirm if you must at this word, but don't escape it! Stay at the center. Accept it!" If you can hear "I am forgiven," you are at the center of the world where God is.

There is another monastery other than that one in the Alban Hills, this one a Carmelite monastery. It's in rural England at a place called Quidenham, very much in the middle of nowhere. As you approach this monastery on foot, which you almost have to do because the nearest train stop is two miles away, you come upon a cross alongside the road. It is an ancient wooden cross, the body of Jesus large and weathered upon it. It is a pilgrim's cross, for those walking along the road. At its foot attached to the upright beam is a wooden panel carved so long ago, with its words stacked up as if in a column. It reads:

“Wanderer stay
and think
on me here
a while
on the cross
so that thou
shouldst
come to me.”

Indeed we are wanderers, but because we have come to this cathedral today, we are more truly pilgrims. Let us be drawn by those words and by the One who speaks them to us. He gets us here in forgiveness and invites us to stay.

“Wanderer stay
and think
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2. Prisoners

“Wanderer stay
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From the center of the world where we are on this God Friday, let us look out with Jesus from the cross on our world. But let us as we listen to his words – him speaking when he cannot move – let us look with him on our world more concretely, more specifically, more locally. Let us look with him from this cathedral out over Seattle. Jesus looks from the cross on Seattle. It may take some courage for us to be concrete and to bring this home, to lift the cross over our city.

As he looks out, Jesus says: “This day you will be with me in paradise.” To whom does he say that? To a thief, a criminal, another like himself sentenced to a criminal’s death. Jesus inclines his head and looks toward this man who alone in all the gospels addresses him without any title but simply as “Jesus.” “Jesus when you come into your Kingdom, remember me.” Jesus looks on a criminal, loves the criminal, responds to his hope, answers personally when called by name. It is a conversation, a trust, and a pact between two criminals.

When we look with Jesus on Seattle from this cathedral, where does he first direct our attention? He looks to the King County Jail almost immediately in front of us, sharing our hill, between us and the downtown; prisoners, thieves good and bad, criminals. He also looks more widely to Monroe, and Purdy, and Juvenile Downtown, and Walla Walla, and all the places where we imprison. There is something instinctively true to Jesus that he who identifies with all humanity, who is in solidarity with us in our condition, would himself, dying as a criminal, identify first of all and be in solidarity with other criminals, others who are pinned and cannot move.

I’m going to ask you today to identify from the center with the reality of just one prisoner. T.S. Eliot says, “The human person cannot bear very much reality.” How true that is! I cannot really or fully bear even just my own reality. It is too much for me. I can bear just a bit of the reality of a few persons. We know in marriage that it takes a lifetime to succeed almost in bearing the reality of just one other person. Indeed, “The human person cannot bear very much reality.” But the great mystery of God’s knowing and loving is that he can bear all reality, the reality of all fully. Jesus from the cross which is the center, the very tree of life, knows, bears, suffers, loves the reality of all fully, beyond even how they suffer themselves. So in this case he looks out, listens to, responds to, loves, suffers every single person within our jails and prisons. I’m asking you – because of your limit and mine – to just choose one person, one prisoner, and to try to bear something of his or her reality.

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Who are in this King County Jail in Seattle; who are in our prisons? They are not us, not like most of us. Did you know that in our country there are more college-age African-American young men in jail than in college? Let me repeat that so that you really hear it: In our country there are more college-age African American young men in jail than in college! Though African Americans account for only 3% of the population of our state, they make up 23% of Washington's prisoners. Isn't that astounding, shocking, shameful, and wrong? And if you went to visit King County Jail lower on this hill or Juvenile Detention behind us on 12th, you'd want to speak Spanish, because our jails and prisons are filled with Hispanic people. And where disproportionately are so many of our urban Native Americans, but in those jails? And did you know that 90% of those in prison are there because of arrests for hard drug offenses?

In universities like my own, Seattle University, we speak of our desire to have more "under-represented minorities" on our campuses, and we boast of our percentages; 13% at Seattle U. By "under-represented minorities" we mean African-American, Hispanic, and Native American. Yes they are indeed under-represented on our college campuses, but not in our jails and prisons. There they are the over-represented majorities. I ask you, not so much what does that say about them, as what it says about us. In our colleges we seek to give special help to some "economically disadvantaged" students. In our jails and prisons, again, the "economically disadvantaged" – i.e. the poor, are almost the whole population. What does that say, again not so much about them as about us?

I'm asking each of us – because we can't as human persons, unlike Jesus, bear very much reality – to choose to look on, but with his eyes, with his instincts, with his words just one woman or man in our jails. Let that person call you by name, as the thief alone called Jesus "Jesus." Let that person say to you as the thief said to Jesus, "Remember me!" And if you can stay there, pinned down, able like Jesus to be got at on this God Friday, respond from your heart. What do you say?

From the cross that is at the center, looking on Seattle, how does Jesus see our building of prisons in our country? How does he see the fact that in this country the largest system of mental institutions, for many people – again the underserved minorities and the poor – the only system of mental institutions, are our prisons? We talk of the closing of mental institutions. We still have them, but they are prisons. How many of those in prison are there fundamentally because of mental problems they have because they cannot cope, fall into crime, and get what mental treatment they need behind bars? Choose just one and let yourself, like Jesus, be got at.

When we look out from the cross at the center of this cathedral on this God Friday on criminals, on prisoners, as Jesus the criminal and prisoner instinctively did, we have to look in this country for which we have responsibility at the issue of capital punishment. The debate rages, arguments are marshaled, new evidence such as DNA causes reconsideration of the death penalty.

I am against capital punishment for a single overwhelming reason: the person whom I love with all my life wrongfully died because of a sentence of capital punishment. Jesus, on Good Friday. I can enter into the arguments and the reasons, and I must, because I owe it to reason with fellow citizens with whom I share responsibility for what this nation does in

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our name. But overwhelming and prior to all argument for me is a reason of the heart as a Christian believer and follower. At the center of all time – and certainly at the center of my time – hangs a man dying in a brutal, tortured way upon a cross, a death penalty exacted and carried out upon him, this wrongfully-put-to-death, innocently-put-to-death, man, Jesus, who is the love of my life. I need no other arguments. For the most personal of reasons I simply owe it to him to be against this kind of penalty, capital punishment, for anyone.

But that's me. That's my faith. This day is about him, about you, and about whom he speaks to and has you look upon. Now again choose your one prisoner – poor and minority and on death row – for those on death row disproportionately are poor and minority – and identify with him or her – yes “hers” also – and let yourself be got at. Hear him or her say “Remember me!” What do you say?

Of course we are all on death row. We are all “good thieves” who have at times stolen for ourselves life that belonged as much to others. All of us here in the cathedral in Seattle turn to the God who can be got at on the cross and say “Remember me!” We know with absolute faith that no matter what our crimes, our sins, no matter what punishment we might have deserved in some world or economy other than his, ...we know he does remember us. But doesn't he also turn to us from the center where he is the lifesource of all humanity, and doesn't he look on us and say to us “Remember me!” Can we face that something which is vindictive and violent in the bloodstream of America, some hidden strain, wild, untamed, uncivilized, coursing alongside our goodness, our America the beautiful! We are good, we are beautiful; but aren't we – always have been and still are – also either still barbarian or at least blind?

I'm ending up trying to have you do what you cannot do. I'm trying to have you take on too much reality, but as T.S. Eliot says, “The human person cannot bear very much reality.” Only God can bear the reality of all and he does so in Jesus on the cross, God grounded, embracing the world. Let's just accept his invitation to be with him at the center of the world. Maybe again try to be with just one criminal, one prisoner of our choosing to whom Jesus says “Thanks for calling me Jesus; I will remember you; this day you will be with me in paradise.”

Let us come back to the center and simplify and choose just one person, or perhaps just let him choose us as his one criminal or prisoner. “This day you will be with me in paradise.” Good Friday; God Friday.

Let us return to the words on the rough pilgrim's cross:

“Wanderer stay
and think
on me here
a while
on the cross
so that thou
shouldst
come to me.”

3. Hospitals

Circled around the cross at the center of Seattle, we listen.

“Wanderer stay
and think
on me here
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come to me.”

We are listening to the last words of Jesus dying on the cross: “Father, forgive”, . . . “This day.” Perhaps more than ever this year we know about “last words.” We all now know how on September 11th, trapped in the burning World Trade Center or on a plane taken over by terrorists, people, knowing they might well die, called loved ones on cell phones and spoke last words. They often were, “Tell the children I love them” or “Take care of the kids.” Last words entrusting beloved into the care of a beloved. How human, how natural, and so often the last words of the dying.

Jesus dying on the cross, but living at the center of the world and of all time, also says: “Woman, behold you son; son, behold your mother. . . .” “Mother, take him into your care; friend, take care of my mother.” We say that everything changed on September 11th, but more truly everything changed on the original Good Friday. It is still changed. Those last words are still being spoken, “Woman . . . son” . . . take care!

If we again bring these last words home to us here in St. James Cathedral in Seattle, to whom might they be spoken? If we focus not so much on where Jesus looks from the cross in our center, as on where his arms reach, to whom are we directed. His pinned arms span to right and to left, to what is all around him. What this evokes for me is the incredible, often unnoticed, but always present reality that we are surrounded by hospitals: Harborview, Virginia Mason, Swedish, Group Health, Providence and we reach out to the Hutch, University of Washington, Children’s Hospitals. And by nursing homes and clinics, senior retirement living and assisted care, and by subsidized elderly apartments. There is no cluster like this in the entire Northwest for 1000 miles in any direction. This hill, in the center of which is positioned this Catholic cathedral, is above all the hill of age, being born, illness, healing, dying . . . and care. The cathedral is positioned like a nurses’ station with corridors running off in all directions to persons who need care.

I find myself in my paneled, presidential office in the oasis of Seattle University’s campus brought up short by someone I’m talking with on the phone saying, “What is going on; what is happening here; why all the sirens!?” “Sirens! What sirens?” I say, because I’ve become used to them, taken for granted, forgotten that I live in a very unusual place of illness, accident, trauma, healing, suffering, operation, giving birth, dying. We here are at the dense center of human life and death, a different kind of “Ground Zero.” We often don’t know it.

Jesus knows it. Certainly his arms outstretched on the cross as he dies reach out and embrace each and every person living or dying this central human reality all around us in our hospitals and care facilities. I think of his arms fastened to that cross as praying arms lifted over all of these people. I think of his praying arms like the arms of Moses on the hilltop who lifted up his arms in prayer for his people in battle. Each time they dropped, the people lost; each time they rose, the people prospered. So he sat on a rock and his two assistants, one on each side held up his arms steadily, and the people found victory. Jesus' arms can't drop. They are nailed to the cross. They reach out in prayer for the victory of each person ill, being born, afraid, suffering, hoping, accepting, dying all around us in the mystery of life and death. His is no easy, distant prayer, for he reaches out in compassion. He is not only in their midst but also in their condition, in his own central, human dense reality of living and dying. At the center of the world, and uniquely at the center of this ring of hospitals, are the arms of compassion outstretched on the tree of life.

May I suggest that these last words – “Woman, behold your son; son, behold your mother!” – are especially spoken to beloved persons in the hospitals and care facilities around us. How right that he says “Woman,” for so often it is women who watch and wait, pray and care, soothe fearful brows, hear last words, and love to the end. Right now as we are gathered around the cross here in this cathedral, how many women stand or sit beside the beds of their beloved all around us? Women, present to the mystery of life: “Woman, behold your son; son, behold your mother.”

Women, I believe are uniquely attuned to the mystery of life, present to it, comfortable with it, able to be there with life at its densest. Women are the “priests of life.” It seems to me they have a certain connaturality with the mystery of life as a whole: giving birth, nurturing life, nursing illness, living an inclusive way of being and loving, feeding, caring for the elderly, watching at death, mourning, believing. Christ is there with them in this. Just think of the power of Christian images, spanning from thousands of Madonna and child icons to perhaps the most powerful Christian image of “The Pieta,” dead son in mother's lap. From birth to death to beyond: “Woman, behold your son; son, behold your mother.”

Let us not forget there is another powerful image between Madonna with child and Pieta. It is the image we contemplate today of Jesus on the cross. That's the image we show. But if we widen the lens, expand the view beyond just the cross, take in the fuller reality, what do we see but women – mother, friends, disciples, others – at the foot of the cross and nearby, waiting, suffering, watching, weeping, but able to be there at the center of the mystery of life, to be there with love. If we could similarly widen our view and see the true reality around us, especially into all the hospital rooms, there too we'd see women, able to be there lovingly. Thank them for hearing and heeding the last word of Jesus.

Thank God there was also a man there at the cross on the day that counted, a beloved disciple, a son. Thank God there are also men who are at bedsides, who are able to be there, loving at the mystery of life and death: “Son, behold!” “Husband, brother, father, friend, behold.” How helpless we all really are. I don't know about women because I think from their connaturality to the whole of life they are better able just to let be – but at least for men I know how much we want to make things right on our own. How hard it is to be helpless, not to be adequate, not to know what to say, to be silent, just to be there in the illness and

dying of a beloved. Jesus only says “Behold,” then he is silent with outstretched arms of compassion, helplessly nailed to the cross. Helpless presence is the only “adequate” response to this dense reality in which he shares, that is around us, and which we too will share.

“Son, behold!”, me too. Three and a half years ago I woke up one morning while on vacation in England with a deep aching pain in my left arm. I tried to deny it, but I knew it was a heart attack. This kind of thing didn’t happen to me, only to others! After only one minute in the emergency room of the Huddersfield Royal Infirmary, the doctor told me: “Take off all your clothes, put them in that sack. You have had a heart attack and are going to be in this hospital for at least a week.” “I can’t,” I said, “I’m on vacation!” But I was there for a week. It had happened to me.

Two things have been impressed on me from that experience. First, what a blessing it is to really know for the first time and therefore, for all time one’s own mortality. Hey, I really am going to die! I didn’t know that till I was 54. It has transformed my life and for the better. Second, how incredibly good it is to let oneself be cared for as I was in that week in the hospital in England. I know I had been cared for as a child, but I had forgotten what it felt like as an adult, a priest, a Jesuit, a provincial, a president. I’m not nearly as good at letting that wonderful experience of being cared for transform my life. Cared for . . . it is basic to life because we are helpless, and not only at the beginning or the end but in the middle too. Jesus both needed care, experienced it, and gave it from the cross. He lives and blesses the dense caring reality that encircles the hill around this cathedral.

September 11th last words, “Take care of the kids.” Good Friday last words “Woman, behold your son; son, behold your mother” . . . take care. I’m sure those who care for their beloved in the hospitals around us come between times into this darkened, quiet cathedral – to seek peace and to pray. They, I hope, hear the words from the foot of the cross:

“Wanderer stay
and think
on me here
a while
on the cross
so that thou
shouldst
come to me.”

4. The Poor

There are seven last words from the cross. It is the middle one that is the dark one. It is as if we descend into this word as into a trough. We descend into the dark, innermost experience of Jesus, the internal anguish and emptiness that accompany his visible suffering. Spoken from this depth we hear Jesus say, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This is a hard word for us to hear, a hard place for us to stay. So we need again to be encouraged:

"Wanderer stay
and think
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come to me."

In my image of the cross at the center of Seattle, Jesus looks out to our prisons and reaches out to our hospitals. Now, what rises up through this dark word of being forsaken, is what is behind him, what he cannot see, what is in back of him. We must take seriously that he cannot see God in this moment of the pit, that he feels as if God has turned his back on him, and so he cries from his not seeing, his blindness, his abandonment, his terrifying aloneness, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Yes we must take seriously his feeling that God has turned his back on him, that he really cannot see God, that God is now hidden from him, as if in back of him, behind him. But we may also, in the concreteness of our lives, hear him crying out or giving voice to those whom we don't see in our city or region, those who are hidden from our view, who are somewhere behind us, perhaps those on whom we have turned our backs: the poor.

One of the most amazing realities of Seattle for me is how much the poor of our city are hidden from us, how much our freeways, malls, neighborhoods, city center, parks, parades, cinemas, bookstores, fireworks, festivals are all structured so that we never have to see the poor. They are pushed off to the side, out of sight, behind us somewhere. You can live and work in Seattle a long time and not see the poor. Oh you do see the homeless, people who live on the streets or stand at traffic lights with signs or inhabit tent cities, but we deceive ourselves if we think that is the face of poverty in Seattle.

I recently came out of a business luncheon downtown in which we'd heard a talk about the realities of Seattle. I was walking along the street with a former Governor of the State. He said to me: "Do you notice that you never hear mentioned the poor anymore? 'Poor' has become the new four-letter word." How right he was! I have long been looking for and advocating for a book, or a newspaper series, that would be called "Poverty in Seattle." I've gone to Elliott Bay Books, whose personnel are the best at finding books for you and that specializes in local issues. I go back about every month and ask, "Do you have a book on poverty in Seattle?" or "What is your best book on poverty in Seattle?" Nothing. We only get occasional angles on poverty in our midst in our local newspapers; we've never

looked the poor in the face. The new four-letter word. Like that I-N-R-I on the cross. If Jesus had one word to say who he is and with whom he casts his lot, there would be on the cross P-O-O-R. And perhaps he cries out for those whom we don't see, who are in back of us, behind us, out of sight, perhaps his cry in this dark word is the cry of the poor, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

This lack of knowledge about the poor in Seattle cannot be anything but deliberate, even if perhaps innocently deliberate. So many of the poor have been pushed south, all the way down Rainier Avenue, and out the south end of the city into that crescent of poverty across South King County: White Center, Seatac, Tukwila, Renton. Out of city, out of sight, out of mind. But they are our poor, Seattle's poor. We just don't see them; don't need to see them as we go about our lives. They are behind the cross, in back of us, behind our backs. They are forsaken.

How is it that we know everything there is to know about business in Seattle, about Seattle's wealthiest one thousand, about high-tech Seattle, environmentally sensitive Seattle, Seattle tourism and entertainment, entrepreneurial Seattle, suburban Seattle, but almost nothing about poverty in Seattle? I have to ask myself if this oversight is innocent, that is, if I am innocent in not knowing, not seeing, not caring. Behind the cross at the center of Seattle are – excuse the four-letter word – the poor of Seattle.

What is the face of our poor? What color, what race, what ethnic background? What languages do they speak? Are many recent immigrants? What is their age; how many are children? What is their gender; how many are women? What jobs do they have? What do they eat? What is their education? Where do they live; what kind of homes, what trailers; what rent do they pay? How much crime, drugs, violence, gangs do they know? What are their names and could I pronounce them? What their hopes and do I recognize my own in theirs? What their hearts and do they feel like me? I want to know a lot about them. What do they want to know about me? The dark, blind, forsaken area behind the back of the cross in the center of Seattle is Seattle's unknown poor. You and I know this day who is the one who stands for, speaks for, and dies for them.

The only place to start to climb out of this dark trough in the middle of the last words of Jesus, is to take the poor to heart. I'm an educator in Seattle's Jesuit Catholic university. Probably the most important question to ask of someone graduating from our university is: "With whom will you stand in your life, whose side will you take, who will you hold in heart, for whom will you use your education because you care?" It is the same most important question of each of us: do we have the poor at heart? Does their reality inform and question our lives. Are the poor or are they not at the center of our hearts?

Jesus too seems to have thought this was the most important of all questions, the decisive question. He says he will one day say to us, "Whatever you did or did not do for the least of these, you did or did not do for me." The poor were at the heart of Jesus, always:

- First beatitude: "Blessed are the poor, the reign of God is yours."
- First public announcement of his mission: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor."
- What to report to John sending disciples to ask if Jesus is the Messiah: "Go and report to him...the poor have the good news preached to them."

- To the man upon whom he looked with love: “You lack one thing...go sell your possessions and give to the poor.”
- To fill up his banquet with guests: “Go out into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor.”
- And when at the end he was being anointed with perfume in anticipation of his being buried, no longer bodily seen: “The poor you will always have with you.”

To have at heart the poor was perhaps the most unmistakable thing about Jesus, a heart that by first instinct thought of and reached out to the poor. They must also be at our heart, be our first instinct. Everything we should or can do for the poor will flow from how much we have the poor at heart.

May I note from my side as a university president that I often experience some of the most wealthy as the ones who fully and most freely and most instinctively have the poor at heart. I think for instance of Genevieve Albers of blessed memory, who left her treasure first of all and most of all to the poor.

Some years ago when I was the Provincial of the Jesuits a strange thing happened to me. I was tiring myself out – as I usually do – trying to do my best as provincial, with all my responsibilities. There was nothing I was not doing. I happened one day to be driving back to Portland from Spokane, driving along the Columbia River. Rivers have a way of unblocking me, allowing my feelings to flow. At a precise moment, while thinking of nothing in particular, I heard a voice inside me – not really “hear” and not really “voice” you understand – but known as something given to me and experienced as not coming from me. The words were very simple, “You lack a loving why.” “You lack a loving why.” These words were more than words, more like a branding. I knew they meant: “You are doing everything, there is in fact nothing more that you could reasonably do, but why, Steve, are you doing it all, and is your why full of love?”

I tell you this because it’s my clearest way of indicating what it means to me “to have at heart.” It means to have “a loving why.” The “loving why” of Jesus was certainly Abba, the Father. But loving the Father meant humanly holding the poor at heart, as the “loving why” of his doing and dying. Are they our “loving why”?

“Wanderer stay
and think
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5. Culture

We ascend now from the low point, the middle of these seven last words. We move up toward the end. As we do so let us quietly renew our intention to stay here at the foot of the cross at the center of Seattle.

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In some ways it is easier to make the crucified Jesus present to the realities of Seattle that I have suggested so far: prisoners, those in hospitals, the poor. It is easier because they all share with him on the cross the reality of suffering, or pain, or deprivation. It is easier to place the cross in the field of misfortune. The cross, we intuit, belongs there. It feels like sacred ground.

But as Jesus cries out “I thirst,” I would now invite us to place the cross in the middle of the culture of Seattle. The cross is at the center of all reality. Let Jesus look from the cross at the culture of Seattle. I know that when I do this I immediately feel uncomfortable, like I am mixing the sacred and the profane, the religious and the secular, the eternal and the temporary. But if we live in, are surrounded by, and thoroughly influenced by our culture, then we must let Jesus view our culture from the cross and speak to it, if he is to be really at the center of our lives. I suggest that when he speaks to our culture, he says, “I thirst.”

The culture of Seattle. We know we have one. We are proud of it. We think it defines us in a very special way. There are some who say that Seattle is one of the only five great American cities with a unique culture. It’s the taken-for-granted reality behind the question that rises more frequently now: “Has Seattle lost its soul?” It is our larger common story that defines our character. A culture is like a fabric woven of thousands of fibers forming a pattern, like a carpet on which we all stand, walk, gather.

The culture of Seattle is a coffee culture, a Costco culture, a Boeing-Microsoft-Nordstrom-R.E.I.-banking culture. It’s a culture of Mariners, Seahawks, Sonics, Huskies, high schools. Woven of rain, a full palette of grays, of mountains, nature, boating, the locks, trails, marathons, biking. Patterned by Bumbershoot, the Bite, Folklife, Salmon Days, Ballard, Book Fair, movies, opera, symphony, theatre, ballet. Our character is defined by Pioneer Square, Broadway, the U. District, the waterfront, the Center, the Experience Music Project, Aurora Avenue, Fremont, the malls, the sprawl, the Space Needle. A patterned carpet with a double cross I-5, I-405, 520, I-90; hemmed by Mt Rainier, Mt. Baker, Cascades, Olympics; filled in by Elliott Bay, Lake Washington, Lake Union, Greenlake, Lake Sammamish. Don’t forget prisons, hospitals, the poor, prostitution, racial profiling, WTO, Mardi Gras, earthquake. In every item I mention, you somehow recognize yourself.

Yet this is just the surface of our culture compared to our history, famous people, collective shames, ways of living, relating, celebrating, mourning.

The question for today is not what do you make of the culture of Seattle, or is “Seattle nice” a bygone myth, or “Has Seattle lost its soul?” The question for today is how does Jesus from the cross at the center of our city and region look on the culture of Seattle. No matter how hard it is to define, this culture is very real, perhaps the most dominant reality around us. Remember, though we cannot bear very much reality, he can and does. When he bears the reality of our culture I think he says, “I thirst.” Why? Perhaps for three reasons.

First, Jesus finds his Father at work in this culture, finds the tracings of his weaving, his Father’s face in the pattern, the Creator actively inspiring and creating in the weavings of the culture. So Jesus thirsts because this culture is not the profane, not the secular, but deep within it and throughout it is also the sacred, not a culture in which to put God, but one in which to find God. “I thirst,” he says. He thirsts for God in our culture and so do we. He looks from a cross planted in the open, in the commons, at the byway, in the center. God is, of course, worshipped in our churches, but also is to be found active, to be discerned, discovered, rejoiced over, in our culture. The first sense of “I thirst.”

Second, Jesus looks upon the culture of Seattle and says “I thirst” because he sees this entire culture as thousands of ways of thirsting for that something more – more human, more divine – that is what the cross really offers, the tree of life. This rich culture of the most “unchurched” region of the country is not a-religious. It is thirsting for God, for the life of God. The beauty, the creativity, the strivings, the celebrations, the communings with nature, the struggles, the shaping of ways of life, and of work, and of relating are one huge pattern of thirsting for the more, the alone, that would satisfy. The cross belongs in culture, planted in the middle of the pattern of culture. Jesus is within and speaks on behalf of this culture, says what it stammers to say, “I thirst.” He voices both its vain attempt to create what satisfies the human hope that is at the heart of culture and voices also its fulfillment in God in whom is planted the tree of life.

Jesus looks upon our culture and says, “I thirst” for a third reason. In order to explain this let me recall to you something about the geography of Seattle. Did you know that originally there were dozens of creeks flowing down all the hills of Seattle, coursing down between old growth trees, down into the lakes and sound? You only have to get out of the city and climb into the hills to discover creeks everywhere. There must have been a lovely sound of this running water over rocks and logs all around where we are right now. Salmon came up these creeks and spawned in gentler, sandy-bottomed, shaded pools. Imagine it! Did you know that not only were there these creeks of Seattle, but many of them are still there? Now they are blocked up, gone underground, paved over or channeled through culverts and drainage pipes. There is one over in the University District that runs unseen under the entire length of the University Village mall; another in West Seattle is covered over by a steel plant. Streams of living water run beneath us wherever we are in Seattle, beneath streets, parking lots, buildings, freeways, churches, schools. Some few of them are now being opened up again to the air, unblocked, freed, able to breathe and give oxygen, cleared, with plantings along their edges. In a few cases salmon fingerlings have been nurtured in the pools of these creeks and – wonder of wonders – the first salmon have returned after fifty years to spawn. The creeks of Seattle.

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When Jesus looks on the culture of Seattle and says, “I thirst,” ultimately it is like these creeks. He is saying that much of our culture is like that paving, cement, mall parking surfaces, buildings that cover over completely, block up, silt in, dispose of through culverts, hide from view, push underground the deep, true original streams of life flowing within each of us and all of us. Culture is ambiguous; it both creates and it covers over. Jesus knows and speaks to both. Now when he says “I thirst” from the cross in the center of the culture of Seattle, he is saying, “Open up the fountains of living water, the deeper springs and resources of your life, the sound and flow that rejoices and ultimately runs to God. Dig up the hardened surfaces of life, the paving of culture over compassion, let God’s life in you breathe, flow, purify, be a home for other life, come into the light, sparkle, refresh.” In this case he says from the cross, “I am the fountain of life. I thirst from beneath the hard-surfaced pavement of your culture.” . . . “I thirst because I bear your reality.”

In the end what a rare but wonderful thing to let Jesus on the cross look on and speak to the culture of Seattle. It is good to be here:

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6. Children

We are almost there on this Good Friday that more truly is God Friday. Jesus is moving toward the Father, returning to the One by whom in his lowest moment he has felt “forsaken.” The words from the cross will reach beyond death to new life, but first the one mortal life given Jesus to live must come to an end, be finished, as it must one day also be finished for us. So let us go to him at this ending so that in our ending we may finally and fully come to him.

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It is so very hard for us to make real the death of Jesus because from where we are we know the other side of the story, the resurrection side of the story. From his side, on the cross, Jesus did not know that side of the story, could not know it, but only could barely hang on to hope in trust, against the overwhelming darkness. His death was real, real as a fact, and real for him. Death was death; last words were last words.

What might have been his dying feelings, his final fight? Denise Levertov captures in a poem what may have been most difficult and most true for Jesus at the very end:

“Maybe He looked indeed
much as Rembrandt envisioned Him
in those small heads that seem in fact
portraits of more than a model.
A dark, still young, very intelligent face,
a soul-mirror gaze of deep understanding, unjudging.
That face, in extremis, would have clenched its teeth
in a grimace not shown in even the great crucifixions.
The burden of humanness (I begin to see) exacted from Him
that he taste also the humiliation of dread,
cold sweat of wanting to let the whole thing go,
like any mortal hero out of his depth,
like anyone who has taken a step too far
and wants herself back.
The painters, even the greatest, don’t show how,
in the midnight Garden,
or staggering uphill under the weight of the Cross,
He went through with even the human longing
to simply cease, to not be.
Not torture of body,
not the hideous betrayals humans commit

nor the faithless weakness of friends, and surely
not the anticipation of death (not then, in agony's grip)
was Incarnation's heaviest weight,
but this sickened desire to renege,
to step back from what He, Who was God,
had promised Himself, and had entered
time and flesh to enact.
Sublime acceptance, to be absolute, had to have welled
up from those depths where purpose
drifted for mortal moments."

We have been listening to the last words of Jesus, words that have, as the poet says, "welled up from those depths where purpose drifted for mortal moments." In that human drift at the end of life he must have felt, as she says so well, the "sickened desire to renege," . . . "the sickened desire to renege."

How poignant, how much a proof of unfailing purpose, how great his victory over the "sickened desire to renege" are the very simple words we now hear him utter, "It is finished." The one who is truth is true to the end. It was not guaranteed, assured, certain for him; for he, like us, had to take one day at a time in trust. Only now does he know that he has not reneged, is indeed the faithful servant, and so only now can say, "It is finished," or as we might put it, "I know at last that I have done what I set out to do, Amen."

"It is finished" is the dividing point of all time, all history, into a before and an after, a what was and what will be, all previous life and all later legacy. For each one of us, though we often dare not realize it, there also will be just as real a "It is finished" in our own dying, a "before and after me," what was my mortal life and what will be, what I have done and what will be my legacy. We only really know our own life, or only know all else in relation to our life. For us too there is a curtain of death dividing all reality between "before me" and "after me. That is real enough because death is real enough. For all of history there is a "before Christ" and an "after Christ." For all of history that I know there is a "before me" and an "after me," mortal life and legacy.

When we hear this faithful "It is finished" from the cross at the center of Seattle, I can't imagine him looking or even a reaching anywhere, only a word uttered from the heart, a sense of his life completed and the hope of his legacy. I cannot help but think that this is a word for the children of Seattle, our children as the legacy of his faithful "It is finished." Remember, "the human person cannot bear very much reality," but Jesus dying at the center of our lives can and does bear all reality. Perhaps here in his finishing he bears the reality of all children. Otherwise there are no children at Golgotha: men and women, friend and foe, but not old and young, only old. Where are the children at Golgotha? Even if they were not there that day, they were there in his heart and hope, and they are there now. Perhaps an eighth last word from the cross should be his own earlier words: "Let the children come to me, for of such are the Kingdom of God."

Our children of Seattle, all of our children of Seattle, all children of Seattle our children. What a revelation it is to go into one of our grade schools like the Bailey-Gatzert Elementary School on the backside of this hill, and to see the children of Seattle. The whole

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world right there in their faces, all colors, mixes, shapes, looks, accents, languages. The whole of the world mixed into a single school, and this school a preview of the future face of the world. They are the legacy of Jesus' "It is finished" and can be of our own life's "It is finished," the aftermath and the "after me" of my life.

We have gotten very much into accountability of teachers through the Washington Assessment of Student Learning at fourth, seventh, and tenth grades. Accountability is fine but it should be applied to all of us when it comes to the children of Seattle, our children. Have we helped a child, given a hand to an unemployed parent, supported a home for orphaned or abused children, become a "Big Brother" or a "Big Sister," worked as a YMCA or YWCA volunteer, provided a summer camp for kids, helped kids in a thousand ways through the United Way and Catholic Community Services, made sure that children do not pay the price of our reform of welfare, kept their well-being first and inviolable, protected the life of the child in the womb, fed, healed, and housed children, and given them hope? There is a measure for the accountability of our society and of our city, and fortunately or unfortunately, that measure of our accountability is our children. Jesus knew it; we should know it.

We at the center of Seattle on this Good Friday should be able to echo with our own "It is finished" the "It is finished" of his life. As it was for him, it should also be for us the whole of our lives uttering a word of hope from a faithful heart, a word to our legacy, our "after me," the children of Seattle, our children.

I cannot as a Catholic priest end this reflection on children as I might have in another year. I know it and you know it. I and we must place the children of the Church of Seattle at the cross. There I first, and my brother priests, must today beg of Jesus forgiveness for priests and for the Church for the abuse of children by priests. Plead for forgiveness and also for healing.

I read a most puzzling paragraph in the P-I last Saturday in an article about clerical abuse of children. I quote:

"Meanwhile, despite the scandals agitating Easter preparations in other parts of the country, Washington Catholics, come (Palm) Sunday, will welcome Holy Week as a chance to reflect at the close of the Lenten season."

I am not sure what that meant.

My view is that this Holy Week for Washington Catholics should not be a time of reflection, quote, "despite the scandals agitating Easter preparations," but that Holy Week is the only place we can take these scandals. I don't want, as the author says, "to reflect at the close of the Lenten season." I want to ask for forgiveness, and to reflect on the close, the ending, of the abuse of children by and within the Catholic Church. The only place I know to

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take that desire is to the faithful One who says from the cross, "It is finished." Please join me and my fellow priests in praying on behalf of our children that we may today say about this abusing of our children, "It is finished," and that we make that be true.

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7. Beyond Death

We started these reflections on the last words of Jesus from the cross by placing the cross in the center of this Cathedral of St. James. With each word we have been looking out with him upon our city and region: prisoners, persons in hospitals, the poor, our culture, our children. It is now time to come back to the center, to this cathedral, and to ourselves as a faith community. With his very last breath, Jesus is about to entrust his spirit to us. So we need to be at the cross in the center and to listen attentively with ears of faith.

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Jesus now is at the very precipice of life at the scary moment of falling over the edge of life into death. He is even beyond “It is finished,” which looks back toward his faithful completion of his life’s purpose. He is about to breathe his last, hang his head and die. But before that, blessedly, a final last word that looks forward beyond that last breath: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” In the end, the very end, an entrusting of his life into the hands of God as he tumbles over the cliff of life into death.

We must for the sake of our own faith, and for the sake of our own dying, make real this moment of Jesus. As the theologian Elizabeth Johnson writes:

“This death was a real death, casting him into the unknown darkness beyond the time and space of this world. It violently tore apart his whole life; no piece of him slipped through its mesh. He died . . . (but) the Easter message proclaims that the Creator Spirit has her way even with death. . . . The crucified one does not die into nothingness; he dies into the absolute mystery of the glory of God. At the decisive frontier he is taken into the hidden, ultimate reality which is the innermost heart of the universe and quickened to new life surpassing all imagination.”

I want to add quickly, “So are we; so are we!” But first the precipice and the fall into the unknown. Jesus slips from life, hanging onto nothing of his mortal life or this world, saying, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” I am suggesting that we hear these last words from the cross at the center of Seattle as addressed to all of us who have faith, to all of our faith communities.

Recently a beautiful and reassuring image has come to me of this falling over the precipice of life into death. It came to me ministering as a priest at the bedside of a dying man, hearing myself say to his sons and families: “He is now in the hands of God; we are all in the hands of God.” I’ve said that a hundred times. This time what came to me was a very powerful and consoling image. I saw God with his hands extended over the whole world and

all his people in blessing and care. His hands were above and were open. But then I saw him focus in time on his only Son dying upon the cross and crying out with his very last breath, "Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit." Quick, just like that, God lowered his hands cupped them beneath his Son falling into death, and caught him, broke his fall in the softness of his palms, caught Jesus up in his humanity, held him in God's own divine life. God answered in this way the last prayer of Jesus, "Father, into your hands I entrust myself." Then, and here's the consoling, reassuring part, I knew that because we share the humanity of Jesus, which God was moved to catch and hold in the free fall of his son's death, God's hands are always now cupped beneath us and catch us in our deaths. This is what it has come to mean for me when we say, especially at the end, but also always, "We are all in God's hands." They are cupped beneath us because of the human death of Jesus. In his only Son, God as it were, has been tricked into catching all his sons and daughters. (This reflection alone is worth a whole Good Friday and is at the heart of why it is called both Good Friday and God Friday.)

We have expanded our view of the cross over the course of these words to see the fuller reality of, for instance, the poor, prisoners, children, etc. Now we expand by faith the view of the cross at the center of Seattle and see with the eyes of faith God catching Jesus – and in him catching all of us – in his hands. That's the full reality; the cross with the "already" of the resurrection. As we expand this view of the cross from this cathedral we naturally encompass all the faith communities, the parishes, for whom this is their cathedral, their center as a unified, believing, Northwest, Christian, Catholic people. Jesus' last words are a confident commending of his spirit into the hands of his Father, but because of that very fact, an entrusting of his life and spirit within this world into our hands, into our communities. Jesus clung to nothing of this world when he fell over the precipice of death in time. He didn't cling or grasp, but he did entrust, gave in trust, his spirit and life to those who would believe in him and would be united – by baptism, by Eucharist – in the communities that would bear his name. What a daring, risky, thing it is to leave behind his life and spirit for this city and this region to the faith communities that cluster around this cathedral. But that's where he is, what he depends on, for his ongoing life in time, in our time; for his presence in space, in our space.

It is essentially an entrusting into a people, a "laos," a laity, a people made possible certainly by the ministry of bishop, priests, deacons, but a people that itself holds in trust this life and spirit of Jesus and makes it manifest in the world, in our region and city, Puget Sound and Seattle. Where did the last breath of Jesus go but to us, the people, to the laity, who are the heart and soul and body of us as a people. The life of these faith communities, these parishes, is not some sociological, numerical reality, but the very life of the Crucified One entrusted in time and space. In these faith communities we receive Christ, in them we are Christ, from them we serve Christ, through them Seattle is blessed.

Two final images. The first a way of summing it up by my wisdom figure, Ruth Burrows. She speaks of the human experience of the death of Jesus and how his death transforms the meaning of our experience. She says:

"Jesus drank to the dregs the cup of human suffering. He did not remove it. Suffering still remains suffering, death remains death. But he

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transformed its meaning, for henceforth, when we drink of the cup of human suffering and death, our lips meet his over the brim.”

“Our lips meet his over the brim” in life which remains human life, in human suffering whose pain is not removed, and ultimately in human death which also remains human death. Still the same, but completely different for henceforth and in all things over the brim our lips meet his . . . and kiss.

And the last image comes from a walk I took along a mountain trail in the snow. The trail was long, gradual, wide because it was once a railroad track over Snoqualmie Pass. I was completely alone for hours going steadily up this trail with blue pack on my back, snow falling heavily. I had been thinking about death and how we can't begin to imagine heaven, but that somehow when our clutch on time and space dissolves, we will finally become most truly who we are, finally our real person, finally alive. As I walked it became more and more quiet as the snow fell, weighed down the branches of the trees, piled up deeper and deeper on the trail. I hiked beyond any trace of earlier walkers. Finally I could advance no further. My heart was leaping up, a boy from Juneau, Alaska, alone in his element. I stepped off the trail into the woods, hung my pack on a tree branch, and standing, ate my lunch. Then I could not contain myself for the beauty, the elation. On a boyish whim I decided to make a snowman in the middle of the wide trail, in the middle of nowhere with no one but me to see. I rolled a huge base, lifted in place a generous mid-section, and then a wide head. I found twigs for eyes, nose, mouth, and a cedar branch for a hat. I stepped back and laughed out loud. My snowman in the middle of nowhere, utterly quiet and white! And then it came to me, bingo, “This snowman is as much like me right now, as I am like the beyond-death person I shall one day become.” The snowman looks like a man, we call it a man, looks like me, has a face and a smile, even a “personality,” but has no real life and will melt away to a few twigs and a brown branch on a path. And I? I too think I have life, have personality, am alive, am me. But I am not in comparison to who I will be fully, at last alive, and finally real in God who will catch me, beside his Son, in my dying, when my earthly life melts away, and bring me into being in Jesus.

Wow! Death is real, for Jesus, for us. But resurrection is even more real, for only then shall we really be and be in him. The words from the cross end with the words from the edge of the precipice that falls not into emptiness but into fullness. “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

Now, at last, it is hard to stay at the cross in the center of Seattle, not because of pain but because of elation, as Easter beckons us beyond.

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