

Death and the grace of “it is finished”

At a recent funeral, some churchgoers were surprised by my choice of texts.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [March 25, 2020](#) issue



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When Nancy died at the age of 95, her death wasn't of cancer, stroke, or a car crash. She died of a completed life. Decades of faithful and fruitful living, replete with Nancy's spark of love spreading infectiously to others, had left her tired at the end. She finished her last breaths inhaling family love and exhaling peace.

It didn't take long for me to settle on a reading for Nancy's funeral. I chose a passage from the Passion narrative in John's Gospel, right after Jesus, dangling from the cross, commends his beloved disciple and his mother to each other's care:

After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty." A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held

it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, “It is finished.” Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:28–30)

For some guests who showed up that day to remember Nancy’s vivacity, these verses must have felt like a mistaken reading, an error in judgment, a bucket of cold water tossed onto what was supposed to be a celebration of life. I selected them quite specifically, however, to remind all of us present of the need to try to stop viewing every death as the snuffing out of a good life. Since death is part of the bargain of receiving life in the first place, it seems strange that we would regularly view it as a concession of defeat, the sad acknowledgment of a spent life, a painful resignation. Why should death be seen only as losing?

What catches most eyes about John’s account of the end of Jesus’ life is that it is clearly finished. It’s over. Done with. Gone. He not only knows his life is finished, he says so. That he “gave up his spirit” might sound to a casual reader like he is throwing in the towel when there is no more zip left in him. But that’s not what’s behind the meaning of the word *finished*.

It isn’t the same kind of finished as when I quit the freshman swim team in high school after only one week of practice. The eight laps that constituted our warm-up every day were more than I could handle. I lacked form, muscles, or experience of any spectacular measure. I remember crawling out of the pool gasping in exhaustion, trying my best not to look embarrassed. I literally threw my towel into the wicker basket after the fourth day. I was finished with competitive swimming forever.

When Jesus says, “It is finished,” the Greek word is *tetelestai*, from the root *teleo* or *telos*. His life has reached its proper end or goal—in terms of not depletion but completion, not quitting but fulfilling. Jesus has accomplished that for which he came into the world. He attains his *telos*, his purpose, embodying the love command in its many expressions. In the end, he dies a completed life, not a finished-off life. Far shorter than Nancy’s yet longer than some others, his life offers us all a fresh way of looking at death.

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