

“Slow Walk thru Holy Week: The Garden of Gethsemane” (fn.:MARK 14 32-42.2019.DOC)

Scripture: Mark 14:32-42

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[This sermon is a continuation of our Lenten series that follows the events of Holy Week]

Mark 14:32-42: ³² *They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.”* ³³ *He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated.* ³⁴ *And he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.”* ³⁵ *And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.* ³⁶ *He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.”* ³⁷ *He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour?”* ³⁸ *Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”* ³⁹ *And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words.* ⁴⁰ *And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him.* ⁴¹ *He came a third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.”* ⁴² *Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.”*

Gardens are usually seen as places of comfort and encouragement. So, for example, Paradise in the opening story of our Bible is a garden—a place intended for human peace. Likewise, one of the most beloved gospel songs is entitled “In The Garden”—a place where there is joy beyond compare. Well, toss those images aside when it comes to the Garden of Gethsemane.

In many ways, the fullest expression of Jesus’ humanity is seen here. Oh, we have many indications of Jesus’ humanity. For example, we know that Jesus could be tired and thirsty—such as when he sat by a well in Samaria and asked for water. We know he was hungry—there are multiple stories of meal times. We know that he felt compassion—he cared for the crowds that followed him. But here, here in the Garden of Gethsemane, we have the description of an emotional state that we have all known or seen. Jesus is described as being distressed and agitated. He is not “cool, calm, and collected.” His words are “I am deeply grieved, even to death.” “Even to death”—that sounds like the suicidal thought that I have known...when life feels like it is just not worth the trouble of living.

And it is in this state, we see Jesus at prayer. Prayer comes with testing. Tests—they create anxiety, which leads to prayer. In light of the restrictions on prayer in school, you perhaps have heard the old line about school prayer: “As long as there are tests, there will be prayer in school.” There are at least three testings going on here in the Garden.

First, one testing that we will not dwell upon has to do with Jesus’ closest disciples. Jesus took three along—Peter, James, and John, who appear to be leaders among the disciples. In other words, Jesus takes his best team members with him. They fall asleep—they fail the test. Jesus’ words to them are now proverbial: the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. In other words, lots of lip service but little follow-through. So, one testing—that for the disciples—leads to failure.

But there are two more testings that are intriguing, even surprising—the test of Jesus and the test of God, the Father. Jesus’ testing is clear: throughout the events of Holy Week, the shadow of his death hangs over all that happens. Death looms clearly here in the garden. For Jesus, the flesh is willing—he has come to Jerusalem, he has figured out that Judas will betray him, and, by staying in

the Garden, he is “findable” by his enemies. He has put himself in the most dangerous place rather than hiding. The flesh is willing.

But what of the spirit of Jesus? Whatever else we might say about Jesus’ spirit, there is certainly an expression of unwillingness. He prays that he will NOT have to go through with the culmination of Holy Week: the cross. He does NOT want to face this hour or drink the cup of death. So, in contrast to the disciples whose spirit is willing but whose flesh is weak, Jesus puts his body on the line, but his spirit seems less than willing.

I do not want to go far in “psychologizing” the mind of Jesus...but I do want to take seriously his words. Jesus does not want to go through the completion of Holy Week: to be betrayed, to be abandoned, to be beaten, to be nailed to a cross, and to die. Maybe Jesus would have resonated with that old line of Woody Allen’s about dying: “I am not afraid of dying; I just don’t want to be there when it happens!”

And should we seek to minimize Jesus’ anxiety and fear? After all, we might assert that he was God’s Son; that he could do miracles; that he had God’s private line for communication, and so on. But I would suggest we are not grappling with this text—we are living in “La-La Land.” We are sleeping rather than being awake!

The radical act of Jesus is to pray. I know that sounds “churchy” but it is radical. The typical response to distress and fear is to act. When your life is in danger, action is what is needed: Call 911. Get out the National Guard. Lock your doors. Check your perimeters.

Instead Jesus prays. And it was not an action prayer like that of Chaplain Howell Forgry in the midst of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor (a prayer that Kay Kyser turned into a patriotic song). In the midst of the attack on the battleship *New Orleans*, Chaplain Forgry prayed: “Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition.” In other words, act, do, get a-move-on! But Jesus stops and prays.

And his praying fits the way he taught his disciples to pray. Recall the very first petition of the Lord’s Prayer—after the opening “Our Father” comes “Thy will be done!” Even in Jesus’ anxiety and fear, he prays: Let what happens be not what I want but what you want. Sure seems like he passes the testing!

Jesus passes the test...but what about God, the Father? Yes, there is a test for God here as well. Jesus spoke much about prayer and, among the things he said, you can find the two themes: (1) the faithful character of the one praying affects efficacy, the power, the results of prayer. So, for example, Jesus would say that if you have sufficient faith, your prayers can move a mountain...that whatever you ask in faith will be given to you.

The faithful character of the one who prays—I suppose I should be honored that people attribute that faithfulness to preacher-types...as if our prayers will get a better hearing than someone else. So, half in jest and half seriously, I get that request to pray for the weather—that somehow my prayer will assure a pretty day for a wedding or the like. My response is to say: “I am in sales, not management.”

Jesus emphasized the faithfulness of the one who prays AND (2) Jesus emphasized that God was better than any parent in answering prayers. Jesus asserted the benevolence of God by comparing

prayer to a child asking a father for a loaf of bread. What father would give his child a stone instead of loaf of bread? Parents love giving to their children. Jesus says, if parents are like that, then how much more is your Father in heaven like that!

Jesus' prayer in Garden puts God to the test: does Jesus' faithfulness measure up? Jesus is not asking to move a mountain, just not to have to die in the way set out for him. And secondly, God is put to the test: what kind of heavenly Father is God going to be? Will God give the loaf of bread asked for...like a loving parent would do? Or, will God give a stone—an almost sadistic response.

Now, you are probably ready for me to make that sermonic “loop-to-loop”—that’s where the sermon leads down and down and down and then “shwoosh,” begins to soar higher and higher. Well, we have reached the “aha” moment in the sermon. The disciples failed the testing; Jesus seems to have passed the testing...but what about God? Will God pass the test and act as Jesus has taught—that prayers by faithful people will be answered and that God will be more loving than the most doting parent?

I am still waiting for the “aha” moment. I have seen too many faithful people lift up prayers that seem to go unanswered. I have seen too many prayers for something as basic as a loaf of bread have the answer, “Here’s your stone.” So, let me shift over into personal testimony about prayer.

I have prayed on my knees, standing up, and sitting down. I have even tried praying with my hand lifted up. I have prayed prayers that are spontaneous and extemporaneous...and prayers that are carefully printed on a page or found on the Internet! I have prayed in busy restaurants with the server trying to take our orders. I have prayed over loud speaker at football games. I have prayed at the bedside as the breath slows down and down...and then comes no more. And still it takes work to pray! What comes most natural to me is living in a sort of “spiritual amnesia.” And I have more to learn about prayer.

But I have learned this: Praying was good enough for Jesus. We have multiple accounts of his praying and his teaching about prayer. I become a bit of fundamentalist here—if praying were good enough for Jesus, then it is certainly good enough for me. Some things I do not have to question...just do.

And I have learned that prayer shapes me...shapes me in good way. Over 50 years ago, Patrick Peyton, a Catholic priest, popularized the saying: “The family that prays together stays together.” Father Peyton’ ministry was this utilitarian, practical emphasis: prayer shapes people for the good. Family prayer made healthier families. But it is more than just families that are better—I am a better person as one who prays—that is as utilitarian and practical as it comes.

Finally, I don’t know how, but I continue to trust that prayer shapes God. My understanding of God—indeed my faith in God—trusts that God does change—God responds in love. I know that sounds almost like heresy—better theologians than I have declared God is unchanging.

However, for me, God’s changing is one of the clear messages of such Biblical stories as Noah and the Flood and Jonah, the prophet who goes to Nineveh. In these stories, the verb “to repent” is used...used with God as the subject. God repents! That sounds to me like God is moved by the plight of God’s creation...moved by prayer.

So I can't explain miracles...but I have seen them. And I offer prayers for healing, but I also ask if you have gone to the doctor. And I am convinced God has better things to do than to worry about if I will get a parking place close to the door outside of Walmart! The next-thing-worse to no prayers at all is trivial prayers!

Jesus passed the test—he prayed “Not my will but your will be done.” He was agitated, distressed, shaken, and grieved. He did not want what God wanted; he did not embrace it as a “warm fuzzy.” But Jesus passed the test.

And like Jesus, our prayers put God to the test: (1) our faithfulness shapes God and (2) God will answer...better than the most doting parent. Let's keep putting God to the test.