

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Matthew 26:36-46 (NRSV)

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." [37] He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. [38] Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." [39] And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." [40] Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? [41] Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." [42] Again he went away for the second time and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." [43] Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. [44] So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words. [45] Then he came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. [46] Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

GO TO DARK GETHSEMANE

The hymn that we will sing after the sermon today encourages us to Go to Dark Gethsemane. In my sermon today I want to question that command. I want to ask,
Why go to Gethsemane? Why would anyone in their right mind want to go to Gethsemane?

Do you know about Gethsemane? The word Gethsemane means oil press. It is a grove of olive trees on a hill outside of Jerusalem. You can imagine workers picking the olives from those trees and putting them into a press to extract the oil.

But, on that night long ago it is a press of another kind. It is a place where Jesus is pressed and pressured by the enormity of what is about to happen.

And the response of Jesus to the press of circumstances is unlike anything we have seen from him before. Usually, the Jesus portrayed in the Bible seems to be a cool, calm in control kind of guy. That makes sense. We believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is God in the flesh. Of course He succeeds where we fail.

If you look at the movies made about the life of Christ, he is most often portrayed in this way. He is an almost Zen like character who stoically observes from afar. To paraphrase the words of Rudyard Kipling, when everyone else is losing their heads and blaming it on him, Jesus keeps his head.

STRUGGLE

But, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane does not seem to be the same person. We sing that hymn, Sweet Hour of Prayer, but that hymn won't do today. Prayer does not give Jesus a calm assurance. The hour that Jesus spends in prayer on this night is not sweet at all.

According to our lesson for today, Jesus is grieved and agitated and at first his prayers just seem to make things worse. Prayer is not a blessed assurance. Prayer is a struggle. There is no other way to put it.

Jesus throws himself on the ground and cries out to God, If there is any other way, I would like to take it please.

I know that feeling. There have been big moments in my life when I thought that something unpleasant was about to happen not as unpleasant as being crucified mind you but bad stuff. And that's exactly what I prayed. Lord, I would like some other solution. I don't want to go through this. This is too painful. Take this away please.

And I bet that almost all of you have had the same experience. Perhaps you've gone through a divorce. Perhaps the love of your life died. Perhaps you lost a job. Perhaps you lost your health. And in that dark moment you prayed, Lord, if there's any other way, please let it be.

No, we don't want to go to dark Gethsemane. We don't want a Jesus who talks like this and acts like this. This Jesus is all too familiar, all too human, and we know what that feels like. We don't want to go there. We want; we need a Savior who above it all or so we think.

Is that what we really want? Is that what we really need? Do we really want a God who is above and beyond our suffering? If we do, we want some other God than the one revealed in Jesus.

When I talk about the Incarnation, I like to say that in Jesus we see the human face of God. We're okay with the God part. But, we're not so comfortable with the human part. We love to hear about the miracles, but we're not so sure that we like it when Jesus struggles and is weak.

Those first disciples were no different. They didn't want to face the horror of the passion and the cross. When Jesus first brought it up Peter took Jesus aside and gave him a short course in positive thinking. No one wants to be a part of a struggle. We want a victory party.

THE SLEEP OF DEPRESSION AND DENIAL

And so when Jesus wanted to gather his closest friends near him in that dark garden, when he needed the friendship and support of his disciples the most, they fell asleep. When we studied this passage at Bible study, someone quipped that this sermon could be (like last week's sermon) yet another sermon on falling asleep.

And it is. But, it's a different kind of sleep that we talk about this week. Last week we talked about the sleep of death and how Jesus could overcome that terrible sleep. This week we talk

about the sleep of denial. Some of us when we're facing agitation and agony, we just close our eyes and try to forget it. We express our depression by just going to sleep.

In Luke's account of this story, he says that this is exactly what happened. The disciples were sleeping for sorrow. The disciples were worn out by the agony and struggle of Jesus. I can understand that. Sometimes after officiating at a funeral and being a part of the agony and struggle of those who are bereaved, I will literally go home and fall asleep in my easy chair.

I'm sure that many of you have similar experiences. There comes a time when we just have to shut out the pain. There comes a time that we have to take a break from all the bad news and watch something else or just sleep to get away from it all.

GRIEVED TO THE POINT OF DEATH

And if we don't do that, then we'll end up feeling like Jesus in our lesson for today. Our grief will make us wonder if life is worth living. That's what Jesus said to his disciples you know. Jesus said, I am deeply grieved, even to death.

It's hard to be a part of grief that runs this deep. It is natural for us to try and find a way to escape someone who is filled with such powerful negative emotions. But, the thing that makes today so difficult is that today it is Jesus who is talking this way.

We all have people that we count on, people that we lean on when times get tough. But, what happens when the person we lean on falls flat on his face? That's what Jesus does in our lesson for today.

If we hear this story aright, it is a very frightening story. No wonder we don't want to go to dark Gethsemane. It is a dark place indeed that even the Son of God is overwhelmed. What hope do we have in such a dark place?

Gethsemane is not only that place where Jesus struggled with God's call to sacrifice; it is also that place where we struggle. We struggle to come to terms with the pain and suffering that surrounds us.

Like the disciples we are just tempted to just shut our eyes to the pain. But, Jesus calls us to open our eyes wide and watch with Him during this bitter hour.

KEEPING WATCH WITH JESUS

The most significant thing we do in the church is keep watch with Jesus. We, just like those first disciples are called to keep watch with Jesus in His time of sorrow and grief. Now what in the world does that mean? How can we keep watch with Jesus today? How can we enter the Garden of Gethsemane?

We go to that dark garden and keep watch with Jesus whenever we stay with those who suffer. We go to that dark garden and keep watch with Jesus whenever we comfort those who are grieved to the point of death.

This is one of the most important things that we do as the body of Christ. It is an action that keeps us awake to what is really important. It reminds us of our mission and why we are called together.

When we go to the garden of Gethsemane it is hard to be petty or proud. When we go to that dark garden we realize that the temptation of the easy way is no longer an option. Going to the garden of Gethsemane more than anything else makes us strong and willing to be a part of God's plan for our life.

One of my preaching professors used to say, If your sermon won't preach at the nursing home or the funeral home, then you might have something, but whatever you have is not the gospel.

A lot of what I hear masquerading as the gospel won't preach at the funeral home or the nursing home. It's all flash and style. And it just doesn't match up with life as we know it.

HIS STRUGGLE AND OURS

I'm really thankful that Jesus struggled in the garden. I can identify with that struggle.

I know what it is to pray, Oh, God please no. Don't let this be so.

I know what it's like to be so sad that you want to die. You reach out for help, but your closest friends keep you at arm's length. It's almost as if they don't want to be infected by that terrible disease called sorrow.

I know what it is to tell someone about a terrible problem, to spill out the depths of your soul only to have that person reply almost before you're through, You think you have problems. Let me tell you what happened to me.

It's as if they were asleep to what I was really saying. That's a very lonely feeling.

And Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane felt the same way. This story represents the height of temptation for Jesus and for us.

OVERCOMING TEMPTATION

The story of the dark garden is at its heart the story of temptation. We have come full circle in our journey this Lenten season. Remember when we talked about the temptation of Jesus at the beginning of Lent? Jesus went into the desert and was tempted by the devil. And one of the temptations was the temptation to bring in the kingdom of God by using the methods of the devil.

The devil told Jesus that if he would just bow down to him, the kingdom could come. He had the power, and they could do it without shedding a tear.

There are some preachers who still fall for this ploy of the devil. They believe that faith is about living a life without pain and sorrow. They teach that to their people.

They take down the cross and never ever suggest that we go to the garden where Jesus struggles and cries and sweats bullets and needs the help of his human friends. No, they turn the faith into some kind of Eastern self-help nonsense.

Friends, that's the devil talking. That's temptation, the temptation to take some other, easier way. That way doesn't exist. The easy way is not God's way. God's way is the steep narrow way. God's way always goes through the dark garden of Gethsemane.

I can understand you wanting to take the easier way. I want to that way myself, and we learn in our lesson for today that Jesus wanted to take that way too.

But, sometimes it's just not possible. Sometimes we have to go right through the heart of darkness in order to find the light. Sometimes salvation can only come when we go to dark Gethsemane and keep watch with Jesus in that awful hour of agony.

There are some things about Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ* that I don't like. I think the violence is over the top and sometimes unnecessary.

But, the scene I think he gets right is the scene that takes place in the Garden of Gethsemane. The movie begins with Jesus crying out in agony, struggling to accept God's will as the disciples snooze.

Finally, the struggle is over. And Jesus steps on a snake that is hissing in the garden. Now that snake is not in any of gospel accounts of the Garden of Gethsemane. But, I think the serpent is a good addition. It represents the serpent that was in a different garden long ago. It represents temptation and evil.

Do you remember the story of Adam and Eve; how they both succumbed to the temptation of the serpent, the temptation to eat the forbidden fruit and become like God?

Well, that's the same temptation that Jesus was facing. Jesus was facing the temptation to do it his own way instead of God's way. This was the last temptation of Christ, the temptation to despair and no longer believe in the purposes and plans of God.

Once Jesus killed that serpent then he was ready to go to Jerusalem and face even death on a cross. The man Jesus totally aligned his will with the divine will. At this moment we can see the logic in that seemingly illogical affirmation that we make that Jesus was fully human and fully divine.

How can that happen? It happens when a struggling human being says to the Heavenly Father, not what I want but what you want.

ALL FALL SHORT

Jesus was the only one who ever did this perfectly. That's why the writer of the book of Hebrews said that he was tempted in every way as we are, but he did not sin. (Hebrews 4:15) Jesus did not sin because Jesus did not succumb to the very human temptation to take the easy way out.

Of course, we are not Jesus. We are not divine. We often sin. We often succumb to the temptation to take the easy way out. We often turn away from those who ask us to keep watch with them in their hour of despair. We often respond to the threat of evil by compromising what we believe in most deeply.

This past week the Governor of New York had to resign in the midst of a terrible scandal. And once more the news commentators wondered out loud why someone who professed such moral strength could do something so stupid and immoral.

The answer is found in what Jesus said to his disciples, The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. To put it another way, we succumb to temptation. We deny the one we believe in most deeply. Instead of recognizing the importance and possibility of this precious moment we squander the opportunity. We seek what we want instead of what God wants.

Don't think that this problem is limited to Democrats or Republicans or Lutherans or Catholics or even those who have no religious affiliation. The Bible tells us that all of us fall short. All of us sin.

All of us make the wrong decision because we are unaware of the importance of this precious moment. We are often asleep to what is really going on. The enemies of Jesus are coming to take him away, and we are just too tired to keep watch. Our eyes are heavy, and our hearts are filled with despair.

Our lives are filled with the things we want instead of the things that God wants. And that's how you explain our bad behavior. That's why disciples fall asleep and then run away at the first sign of danger. That's why even the brightest and most courageous among us often betray and deny what we believe in most deeply.

It takes courage to visit dark Gethsemane because in this awful place we see the darkness in our own heart. But, in Gethsemane Jesus comes to us again and again to try and wake us up.

THY WILL BE DONE

We are not Jesus. We do not always make the right decision. But, sometimes, by the grace of God we can honestly pray, Not my will but yours be done and really mean it

In Sunday school these past few weeks we've been talking about the fact that the words of the Lord's Prayer are deceptively challenging. We know them so well. They flow so easily off of our tongue. And yet, if we took those words seriously, our lives would change radically.

One phrase that particularly caught our attention was "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

That's the same thing that Jesus is saying today in the Garden of Gethsemane. But, it surely doesn't roll off of his tongue as easily as it rolls off of ours. Jesus is wide awake when it comes to God's kingdom. Jesus knows that the coming of the kingdom is a struggle, and in his case the coming of the kingdom will mean a cross to bear.

But, nevertheless Jesus says in the middle of the struggle, "Despite the way I feel, your will needs to be done."

In the Garden of Gethsemane, feelings are not to be trusted. Feelings can lead us to despair and even suicide. But, Jesus shows us that even the greatest pressure and even the greatest temptation can be overcome by these simple words, "thy will be done."

We may say those words through the gritted teeth of struggle. We say those words even though we are filled with doubt. But, the important thing is that we say those words and mean those words.

The Apostle Paul once wrote, "If God is for us, who can be against us." Jesus came to tell us that God is indeed for us. We learn this lesson not when things are going well but in our darkest hour. Prayer comes alive when we turn to God in our darkest hour. We come to God when we least feel like it and ask that the great burden might be removed.

But, strangely enough, we too learn through the struggle that the answer is not always found in getting what we want. The answer is more often found in trusting the goodness and salvation of God no matter what happens. The answer is found in believing that God is for us, and that is always a winning hand in life and in death. For in life and in death we belong to God.

FACING THE DARK SIDE

Many years ago President Jimmy Carter put on his Mr. Rogers sweater and addressed the nation. He told us that we had an energy crisis that we couldn't continue to consume energy at the same level forever. He told us that we would have to conserve and sacrifice for the greater good.

We didn't listen.

Times changed. Oil production increased and prices dropped. We thought that he had it wrong. We fell asleep. We began driving bigger cars again. We said that the President was a pessimist, that what we needed was just a better more positive outlook on the future.

But, now, many years later it looks like Jimmy was right. Things aren't going so well on the energy front, and it's dragging down our economy. This dark time economically has been necessary to wake us up to reality. Perhaps this will be our salvation. Sometimes we don't do what is necessary until we face the dark side directly.

From a spiritual standpoint that's the purpose of Gethsemane. The dark events of Gethsemane force us to wake up. When our world is being turned upside down and our way of life is being threatened, then we get really serious about following Jesus.

And so this week I would encourage you to spend some time watching with Jesus in dark Gethsemane. Spend some time this week facing those facts that you would rather ignore. Allow yourself some time to agonize over your fears and your weaknesses.

Allow yourself to struggle with God. Ask God if there is any other way. It's okay to be honest with God. God knows. God cares.

And then, after watching and struggling, pray as Jesus prayed, not my will but thine be done.

Go to dark Gethsemane.
It's in Gethsemane that the road to salvation begins.

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)