

DISCIPLINES OF FAITH: PRAYER

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Luke 22:39-46

Other than the account of the crucifixion, our reading for today describes what is, without a doubt, the darkest point in Jesus' life. Here, in the 22nd chapter of Luke's gospel, as I read, the story hits bottom. Jesus is abandoned by those closest to him; he is betrayed, arrested, denied, and beaten—all of which occurs within the span of just a few hours. I say it is 'darkest' because, for one thing, it takes place outside, late at night—it was dark. But the larger reason that this is so dark is that everyone around Jesus fails him. At no other moment is Jesus so alone in his journey.

Our reading for today picks up immediately after Jesus and his disciples have finished celebrating the Passover meal. It is the week of the Passover celebration in Jerusalem. We think of this as taking place on Thursday of Holy Week. At that meal, as you will recall, Jesus took the bread and held it up before the disciples telling them, *This is my body, which is given for you*. And then taking the cup of wine he says, *This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood*.

When the meal is over, Jesus and his disciples head back out to the Mount of Olives. It was here that they were staying. Luke has already informed us that during this time in Jerusalem it was Jesus' routine to teach in the temple during the day, and then *at night he would go out and spend the night on the Mount of Olives*. The Mount of Olives is a hill just outside the city walls—about half a mile away. I imagine that Jesus and the others were in effect camping there under the stars. Remember, they are just visitors to Jerusalem. They don't have a place to stay. With the Passover festival in full-swing, all accommodations would be full.

So, after the evening meal in the city, the group walks back to the Mount of Olives. When they arrive there Jesus stops the group and instructs them to pray. He says, *Pray that you may not come into the time of trial*. He then walks a bit further by himself and kneels down and prays to God saying, *Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done*. It is not hard to hear the anguish in his voice. He knows what will happen but he is committed to God's will.

When he was finished praying, he returns to his disciples but finds them sleeping. Jesus had asked his disciples to stay away and pray. But they can't. Jesus wakes them asking, *Why are you sleeping?* and repeats the words *pray that you may not come into the time of trial*. His disciples had failed him. The night grows darker.

It was at this time that a mob approaches from Jerusalem—a cabal of priests, slaves, and temple police led by Judas. There is a skirmish and Jesus is arrested. He is taken to the home of the High Priest. The next day he is tried and crucified.

Today is the Fifth Sunday of the Season of Lent. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday and then Easter. During Lent, I have been preaching this series of sermons called Disciplines of Faith. Each week I have invited you to consider a classic spiritual practice. We've looked at fasting, solitude, simplicity, and almsgiving. Today, I'm going to end the series talking about prayer. Now, these are not the only spiritual disciplines available to us. At some point in the future, maybe next Lent, we can look at other practices such as meditation, service, confession, and more. Let me know if you are interested.

I am almost embarrassed to admit how much I have enjoyed bringing these sermons to you. It has been exciting each week to dig deeply into these spiritual practices. I hope these sermons have brought something to your own spiritual lives.

And on a personal note, because several of you have asked, I am pleased to report that I have been faithful to my pledge to fast from ice cream during Lent. Will I return to ice cream on Easter? Absolutely. God doesn't desire that we be miserable. However, it has been spiritually enriching to be able to take my ice cream desire and purposefully replace it with the sweetness of God's spirit.

So, what is prayer? A classic definition can be found in the Westminster Shorter Catechism which tells us: "Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgement of his mercies." This definition actually describes four different kinds of prayer—prayers of adoration, prayers of confession, prayers of thanksgiving, and prayers of supplication. Let me read the first part again: "Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will..." Prayer is giving ourselves to God's holy will. *Thy will be done*. In short, prayer is a conscious relationship with God. The spiritually inexperienced may believe that prayer is just getting on your knees and invoking God's name. And it is. But that is like saying that an automobile is just a coat of paint. It is, but it is much more. The paint is what we see. The car is what is beneath. Invoking God's name is what we see. Prayer goes much deeper.

Prayer is not just talking. Prayer is listening as well. Prayer is a conscious relationship with a give and a take.

I have an in-law who never stops talking. He means well, but he just talks to fill some emptiness in his life. It is impossible to have a conversation with him because he doesn't allow space to listen. There is no give and take, just him taking. How many of our prayers are us just talking, talking, talking, and never stopping to listen?

Now, I want to be clear that when speaking of the discipline of prayer that I am talking about personal prayer. Corporate prayer—the prayer we do here in worship—is something else entirely. What we do here is liturgy; it is ritual; it is a beautiful, choreographed dance with our Lord.

The writer Richard Foster makes a wonderful point about prayer. He says that “to pray is to change.”¹ And that is what makes prayer so terrifying for us. It requires change. If we are unwilling to change, then prayer becomes like being with my in-law. It goes nowhere. It’s just talk. Prayer requires that we talk, but also that we listen, that we engage in a give and take with God. In time, we will learn that we need to talk less and listen more. As our relationship with God deepens, we become more influenced by the divine. Just as we are changed by our relationships with one another, we are changed by our relationship with God. When we practice the discipline of prayer, we are purposely, intentionally making ourselves vulnerable to God’s gravity.

We find examples of prayer throughout the Bible. In fact, one could make the argument that the entirety of Scripture is one prayer. Two years ago, I preached a ten-part series called “Teach Us to Pray” where I looked at great prayers (and pray-ers) of the Bible: Elijah, Hannah, Paul, David, Solomon, and more. The psalms are themselves prayers to God—prayers of joy, of hope, of need, of lamentation. We find prayers in the Old Testament and the New. For us as Christians, the greatest of these is the one we call the Lord’s Prayer. The gospel of Luke tells us that the disciples approached Jesus with this request: *Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.* And Jesus offers them this prayer: *Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial.*

But more important than the content of the prayers is the fact that Jesus himself prayed. He prayed at his baptism; in the wilderness he prayed and fasted for 40 days; before selecting his 12 disciples, he *spent the night praying to God*; then there are the many times that Jesus *would withdraw to deserted places and pray*; he prayed when in need as we see in his prayer at Gethsemane; and then, on the cross, Jesus prayed. He even prayed for those hurting him.

And when he prayed, what direction did his prayers take? As we see in today’s reading, he prayed that God’s will be accomplished no matter what the cost. *Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.* As the theologian Fred Craddock puts it: “From the day of his baptism Jesus has through prayer lived in the will of God” (Craddock, p. 262).

Prayer is crucial in Jesus’ life. And by prayer we know he doesn’t mean grand public performances like the Pharisee in the parable who prayed out loud for all to

¹ Foster, p. 33.

hear. Prayer is conversation with God, it is listening, it is meditation, it is thinking. And prayer is a discipline; it is an exercise that makes one stronger the more they pray. As we see on the Mount of Olives, prayer prepares one for the tough times.

And on that dark night when everything went against him, Jesus did not run or panic. He continued on, bolstered by his prayer. Luke describes the prayer as being like an angel that gave him strength. Luke tells us that in his anguish, Jesus prayed more earnestly, *and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground*. This may to us sound a bit repulsive, but it actually is an athletic metaphor. Jesus is like a sprinter at the start—he has trained, he has warmed up, and he is ready for the race, the sweat dripping from his face. When Judas appears with the crowd and Jesus is arrested and beaten, he is able to continue on, a lamb being led to sacrifice. He is prepared.

I have no doubt that Luke used this passage to teach his own congregation about discipleship. To be a follower of Jesus means that one can expect to suffer, to sacrifice. It is not about our will but about God's will. Our prayer is that God's kingdom will come. We might want to pray for the good things in life, for happiness and success, that we will be kept safe. But no where is this Jesus' prayer for himself or for us. Jesus prays that God's will be done. His prayer for us is for daily nourishment, that we are forgiving, and that we are not brought to the time of trial.

And this is not a prayer that is done once and forgotten. Prayer is to be a daily, continual task. It is an exercise, a regimen, a discipline. And when we are strong in prayer we can better endure the dark times that will arise—a financial setback, and illness, the death of a loved one.

Of all disciplines of faith, prayer is the greatest. In these two weeks before Easter, I implore you practice this discipline. If you are an accomplished pray-er...wonderful. If you are less experienced, then just start small. Set aside a quiet time and place and spend a few moments talking and listening. Don't expect much right away. You can't run a marathon without training. But make prayer your discipline as we draw closer to Easter.