

Watch and Pray

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

March 25, 2018 – PM Sermon

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Matthew 26:36-41

We often find ourselves in the Garden of Gethsemane around Holy Week. This is a familiar Lenten story. Usually we read it at this time of year as a way to remember Christ's suffering on our behalf. We read it to remember what he did for us and for our salvation. We don't come to the garden for practical instruction about how to pray. And yet there is much we can learn here. In this passage, Jesus is not just facing his death and pleading with his heavenly Father, he is actually in teaching mode. He is teaching the disciples and he is teaching us how to pray. So, as we approach a special prayer time of our own, as we spend time tonight sharing our physical emotional needs and praying for them, let us listen to what Jesus has to teach us in the garden. Based on my study, there are five things I want to share with you tonight.

First Jesus' prayer comes out of extraordinary pain. Look at verse 37. Matthew tells us that when Jesus comes to the garden he begins to be sorrowful and troubled. We've read those two words a hundred times it's easy to miss their weight. Sorrowful is the word *lupeisthai* in the Greek. It's a word that's also used to describe the pain of childbirth. So imagine the kind of grief that makes you convulse, a grief that comes in waves. Imagine a physical grief so wrenching that you have trouble eating. We've probably all seen people whose grief is so strong that they can't eat. They lose weight. Their grief shrinks them. Some of us have been those people. That's the kind of grief we are talking about. Jesus is sorrowful and troubled. Troubled is the word *ademonēin* in Greek. At its root it's a word made from the word for home, *demos*, and the prefix, *a*, meaning without. To be *a-demos* is to be without a home. So that's a grief so deep that you lose your bearings, you lose track of your basic orientation points. Like a widow who loses a spouse and finds that suddenly her home is a strange and painful place; that's a-demos. Jesus is disoriented by his grief. When he was with his Father in heaven, he was all-knowing; now he is something like confused.

That's Matthew's description of Jesus' grief. In verse 38 we have Jesus' own description. My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Overwhelmed with sorrow is *perilupto* in the Greek. It literally means surrounded – *peri* (perimeter) – by sorrow – *lupto*. The picture Jesus paints with this word is that sorrow is all around him and it's squeezing him, it's closing in, to the point of death. Like he's being smothered by his sorrow. Have you ever really talked to someone who's fighting depression? This is how they describe the affliction. Depression is a heavy cloud that presses in on you and feels like it's smothering you in sadness. I'm not saying Jesus is clinically depressed; I am saying that his description of how he feels in that moment echoes the smothering weight of depression. Jesus' pain is enormously human in this moment. His suffering looks just like ours.

Second, notice what Jesus does with his suffering. He does not try to carry it alone. He shares it with the community. More than that, Jesus our Lord expresses a real *need* for the support of his friends in his pain. Notice: he doesn't share his need with everyone! He tells nine of the disciples, "Sit here and wait while I pray." He takes Peter, James and John off with him separately, and it's when he is off with them that his sorrow comes out. It's when he's with this smaller group that he begins to be troubled. It's when he's in that smaller setting that his emotion shows.

This is so human. When are with a larger group we keep our pain to ourselves. But when we are with a smaller group of folks, people we know well, we let it out. You walk around work and you function and you smile, but then your friend comes over to talk, and the tears flow. In a way, what Jesus does in this passage is what we will do tonight in this service. We will have the opportunity to go off from the main group and bring our needs to the smaller group. You will have a chance to share need of your heart with an elder and a pastor. Those two people will watch and pray with you. And it is good that we should do this. We are not meant to carry our burdens by ourselves; our burdens are meant to be shared. 'It is not good for man to be alone'...God said that long before this in a different garden. Now Jesus is saying it again through his actions in the garden of Gethsemane. If Jesus needed to share his pain with a few close people, we will probably need that too.

Third observation, we just said that this passage has a gentle word to sufferers, encouraging them to share their burdens within the body. This passage also has gentle reminder to the rest of us that huge part of our call as disciples of Jesus is to watch and pray with each other. It is fundamental to the Christian walk. Watchful prayer is the fiber that the Spirit uses to knit us together as a community. Watchful prayer roots us in Jesus and in each other, and keeps us steady in storms. Or to use the language of this passage, watchful prayer roots us in Jesus and in each other and keeps us from being swept away by temptation.

Peter has to learn that in our passage. Until this week I never noticed that Jesus singles out Peter in his rebuke. Have you ever noticed that before? After praying the first time Jesus comes back and finds Peter, James and John sleeping, but when he says, 'Couldn't you keep watch with me?' he says it to Peter. Look at verse 40. Why is that?! I think it's because right before this passage Peter had just made a bold, chest-thumping prediction: "*Even if all the others fall away, I never will! Even if I have to die with you I will never disown you!*" Peter has this bold, romantic vision about what it will be like to fight for Jesus. He will stand boldly before those who would oppose his Lord, he will throw his shoulders back, he will put his hands on his hips and in a loud clear voice he will say to the hordes evil, "*Begone fell creatures lest I vanquish thee. I shall not quail at your slings and arrow. Yea verily I shall fight for my Lord.*" Or something like that. Peter imagines himself standing up to a thousand enemies for Jesus. But then when all he has to do is stay awake, when the only thing he has to fight is sleep...he surrenders.

The romantic view of faith is dangerous. The enemy doesn't come to us in the guise of a snarling demon; temptation finds us through things like sleepiness and boredom and disappointment. It comes to us in those common things because that's when our guard is down. The work of fighting the enemy rarely involves standing in front of demonic hordes and making bold proclamations, the battle of faith is fought through simple things like watching and praying and showing up for worship and loving your cranky neighbor. That's how we keep from falling into temptation. And we know this. If a parent thinks that growing deep roots of love with his children will come through taking them to Disneyworld and buying them an expensive motorized toy car they can drive up and down the driveway, they're crazy. Deep relationships with your kids are built by kitchen table time. Deep relationships with your children are built by listening to their stories, asking them questions, and sitting on the edge of the bed every night so you can pray together. This work of watching and praying for each other is absolutely central to the practice of our faith.

Fourth point, you don't need to be ultra-confident in your prayers. There is a school of prayer that says, you have to ask in faith, which is of course true. We should all pray in faith in

Jesus. But by pray in faith these folk meant that you have to ask boldly! You've got to claim the promises! Kenneth Copeland is a good example of this. He tweeted this on March 16: "Do you need a car? Today, make the decision to take that car by faith. Say, "Thank You, Lord for my car. Lord, I see myself in that car! Thank You, God. I believe I've received it and I have it. I take it by faith today. "You've got to believe that the Lord will give you what you're asking for; there's no room for waffling maybe prayers.

This is nonsense. This is toxic nonsense. When Jesus prays here, he is not sure of what is going to happen. "If it is *possible*, may this cup be taken away from me." He's not sure how this is going to go. He's living in the land of possibilities, not certainties. It's an amazing thing! As he gets closer and closer to his death, the all-knowing God lives under the same cloud of uncertainty that engulfs us all. But uncertainty does not stop Jesus' prayer; instead Jesus prays a kind of prayer that is a good model for a confused and pain-stricken person. He tells his Father what his heart wants: "If it is possible take this cup away from me." He is honest with his Father about what he's feeling, but then he says: "Not my will but your will be done." That's a great model for all your prayer: Tell him honestly what you want. Show him your heart and share your hopes. But then surrender yourself to his will, even when his will seems like the one thing you absolutely don't want. That's a prayer of faith! The prayer of faith is not uber-confidence in a specific personal outcome; it is a child-like trust that the Father will take care of us even when we don't understand what's going on.

Final point, when I see Jesus disoriented by grief in this passage, when I see him telling his friends that it feels like his grief suffocating him, when I see how much he needs his friends to help him, when I see how much the threat of death weighs on him, I am so glad that this man is my high priest. I am so glad to know that when I pray, he is at his Father's right hand interceding for me. That's what Hebrews 2 tells us: "*Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared their humanity...he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God...because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those being tempted.*"

Here's the picture that passage paints: Later many of you will get up and come over to a group where we will bow our heads and pray our small human prayers, and as we pray Jesus is at the right hand of the Father adding his words to ours: "*Father, see Mary Smith down there, see what she's going through? She can't think of anything else but her illness, she's constantly distracted, she feels smothered. She's afraid that this might be the end of her life. Father, I know what that's like. It's a terrible feeling! Father we know she's safe, we know that we have an eternal hold on her, but she's confused and she can't feel our hand holding her. Father give Mary what she needs. She's your child; let her rest in the cradle of your grace.*" He is a faithful and merciful high priest. So bring your grief and your sickness and your worry to God tonight, and as you do it know that there will be 4 people in your prayer group. It won't just be you and the elder and the pastor; Jesus will be there too. Your wounded high priest, pleading your cause at the throne of God. So, in the words of the preacher of Hebrews, "*brothers and sisters, since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere hearts and with the full assurance that faith brings.* (Hebrew 10:22)"