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Hebrews 5:7-10

Mark 14:32-52

VIA DOLOROSA: PASSIONATE PRAYER

Via Dolorosa – the way of suffering. We are exploring Jesus’ journey toward the cross during this Lenten season in hopes of better understanding why and how we are called to follow someone who came to an early and painful death. Today, we pick up that journey on the night before he died. After Jesus had shared his last supper with his followers, they went to a place called Gethsemane. That location in Jerusalem is thought to be where there is still an olive grove at the base of the Mount of Olives, just half a mile to the east of the Temple Mount. The name ‘Gethsemane’ means ‘crushing place’¹ which suggests that there was a press located there to make olive oil, but the crushing place was a good name for what Jesus was experiencing. He foresees the physical and emotional suffering that is on the horizon for him. He has just told his followers that he knows they will desert him. One of his disciples is in the process of betraying him, turning him over to those who were seeking to have him killed. Things look very bleak.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian who was involved in the underground resistance movement against the Nazis. He was part of a group that actually tried to assassinate Adolf Hitler in 1944 and when the plot failed, he got arrested. While Bonhoeffer was in prison facing his execution, he wrote a number of letters that later got published. As he was reflecting on what far too many people in Germany had done during the Nazi Party’s rise to power, he wrote this: “We have been silent witnesses of evil deeds; we have been drenched by many storms; we have learnt the arts of equivocation and pretense; experience has made us suspicious of others and kept us from being truthful and open; intolerable conflicts have worn us down and even made us cynical. Are we still of any use?”

Bonhoeffer then answers his question in this way: “What we shall need is not geniuses, or cynics, or misanthropes, or clever tacticians, but plain, honest, straightforward men (and women). Will our inward power of resistance be strong enough, and our honesty with ourselves remorseless enough, for us to find our way back to simplicity and straightforwardness?”²

Jesus was actively, peacefully, powerfully resisting an earlier empire that was also brutal. He related to people in power, to his followers, to God in plain, honest, and straightforward ways. At a point when Mark describes Jesus as distressed, agitated, and deeply grieved, he asks for the support of his closest followers, Peter, James, and John while he would be praying. But they have no capacity to truly be there for him at this point. The gospel account then tells us that our Lord throws himself on the ground to pray. He seemingly has no place else to go, but it is the best place to end up being. For when he throws himself down to pray, he finds himself in God’s loving embrace.

He turns to God in a prayer that shows a deep intimacy and trust. He addresses God as “Abba, Father.” Although Mark was originally written in Greek, ‘Abba’ is a term of endearment in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke in everyday encounters. ‘Abba’ is an intimate form of Father, much like ‘Papa’ in English. At a time when he could count on little else, his trust in our loving God was a sustaining force.

If we search the Gospel of Mark for the Lord’s Prayer, we won’t find it. In this earliest gospel account, the only content of a prayer from Jesus’ lips that we find is what he expresses at Gethsemane.³ As I said earlier, this is the time when his world seems to be collapsing upon him. Everyone else has abandoned him, but he turns to God.

Mark does make clear that Jesus did not just turn to prayer when he was in the worst fix. It is a central part of his life and through it comes the strong trust in the God to whom he prays. Mark tells us of other times when Jesus went off to be in prayer, with it being clear that time dedicated to prayer was a regular

occurrence for him. Jesus describes his ministry of healing as coming through prayer. He tells his followers that prayer combined with faith is powerful. He practices what he preaches.

But in this instance, Jesus does not get all of what he prays for. He expresses himself to God honestly, pleading for deliverance from the suffering and death toward which he is moving. He tells God what he hopes for, spelling it out three times. He pours out his heart before God. But what he wants most is for God's will to be done and he asks for that, with his understanding that God's will was more important than what he wanted.

It is hard to understand what God's will might be in this case. When Judas kisses Jesus in betraying him to be arrested by the temple guard, it certainly seems that action would be counter to God's will. Jesus' crucifixion as an act of political terrorism by Rome and a convenient way to be rid of a nuisance by some of the religious leaders is understood as the ultimate rejection of God. That too would seem to be counter to God's will. And yet, God does not intervene to stop this dreadful, torturous death that would happen to Jesus. However, when others whom I have known have been killed violently and unjustly, I cannot believe their death was God's will. There is through this passage at least one thing that I can affirm about what Jesus understood to be God's will for him. He understood it at least as being that he was not to back away from proclaiming God's loving reign, nor to cower from the consequences for the truth for which he stood. And he could trust that God wanted to enable him to live and die faithfully.

When Jesus was praying in Gethsemane, and his closest followers were falling asleep instead of hanging in there with him during his time of duress, he urged them to pray that they would not be overcome by the challenges ahead. Then he said in assessing them, "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Perhaps Jesus himself felt a similar willingness and weakness, but he knew to whom to turn in prayer in times of greatest need and in his everyday practices as well. He knew he would be met there by the only One who is absolutely

trustworthy, who cared about and understood his needs even better than could be expressed in words. And as one who was honest to God in prayer, he was bolstered with direction and purpose and accompaniment. I dare say we won't likely ever be in as difficult a place as Jesus was, but all of us will face some frightening or bewildering times. Jesus found in prayer that he was not wrong to call God 'Abba.' In a spot named 'crushing place,' he found an eternal embrace. In whatever circumstance we may find ourselves, it is a gracious, loving, divine embrace to which we are also invited. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ <http://www.ask.com/questions-about/Meaning-of-Gethsemane>

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Touchstone, 1997.

³ I do not consider Jesus' words from the cross to be a prayer, as much as his quoting of Psalm 22 in this moment of distress. That will be a focus for the concluding sermon in this series.