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Psalms 143:1-8

Matthew 26:36-46

GRACE AT THE CRUX: STAYING AWAKE IN PRAYER

It is often difficult to gain access to someone who has the power to address an urgent concern, whether that person be a political figure, a health care decision maker, or a corporate executive. One of the wonders of our Christian faith is the assertion that you or I or anyone else has 24/7 access to the One who has all power to address the most urgent of concerns. Yet, we often neglect this great spiritual gift called prayer. We begin this Lenten season, this period of time prior to Easter, with a look at how Jesus prayed, with the understanding that we could grow in our appropriate use of this great gift. After all, we have at times referred to our congregation as a house of prayer for all people. Let's see how we might grow as people awakened to God's gift of prayer.

During this season, we will be focusing on Jesus' journey toward his crucifixion. This important part of the gospel narratives sometimes gets crunched into Holy Week, and we end up giving little attention to it. During this Lenten season, each Sunday, we will be focusing on Matthew's telling of Jesus' experiences in the hours leading up to and during his crucifixion. We start just after Jesus had his last supper, a Passover meal with his disciples on Thursday night. He leads them to a garden named Gethsemane, so that he might spend some time in prayer. 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 where the temple was. 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, Judas, is in the process of betraying him, turning him over to those who were seeking to have him killed. Things look very bleak.

Jesus leaves the larger group and takes only Peter, James, and John to a more secluded spot to pray. As we heard last week, these are the same three disciples who Jesus took with him on the mountain when he was transfigured. On that occasion, the three disciples fell to the ground in awe and fear when they heard God's guidance for them to listen to Jesus. This time it is Jesus who throws himself to the ground in distress as he seeks God's guidance. He asks his disciples to stay awake with him in prayer. In Matthew, we listen to Jesus teaching about staying awake in some of his parables, and we realize he is hoping for more than his disciples just fighting off sleep. Earlier instances of 'staying awake' language had to do with watching alertly for God's will to be fulfilled with heaven's reign over all.

Jesus was actively, peacefully, powerfully resisting a human empire that was also brutal. He related to people in power, to his followers, to God in plain, honest, and straightforward ways. On that Thursday night when Jesus is 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. At a time when all his hopes seemed to be collapsing and no one was standing with him, he turns in prayer to God, his sustaining presence.

Matthew makes it 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. The gospel narrative 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.

However, at this pressure-packed moment in Jesus' life, his prayer takes a different form than when he taught a prayer primer we call the Lord's Prayer. During our Wednesday bible study group this week, we talked about the acronym A-C-T-S,

which some people use to teach about well-rounded prayer. The ACTS stands for a prayer that includes adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. We hear Jesus' prayer in this instance move directly to supplication, which means asking for what you want and need. As Jesus was aware of plots to end his life, he wanted God to show him a way where he did not have to suffer and die. He tells God what he hopes for, spelling it out three times, pouring out his heart in prayer. He does not get all that he asks for. Yet, in addition to that supplication in Jesus' prayer is submission to God's will. 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. Through prayer, Jesus is strengthened by God to do so.

While 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 directional purpose and strengthening 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. I hope we can be fully awake to our own needs, expressing them to God. In times that call for prayer, I hope we can be fully awake to the needs of those around us, sticking with them in their times of distress. I hope we can be awake to a faith capacity to place our trust in God's will, even when we don't fully understand it. As we awaken to this kind of prayerful living, we give thanks that when Jesus was 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. During this Lenten season and beyond, I pray that God will give us the capacity to be fully awake to make use of that truly wondrous divine gift of prayer. As I conclude that prayer, I will say 'Amen,' which means, may it be so.

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