

Runners

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Mark 14:32-50 (Common English Bible) ³² Jesus and his disciples came to a place called Gethsemane. Jesus said to them, “Sit here while I pray.” ³³ He took Peter, James, and John along with him. He began to feel despair and was anxious. ³⁴ He said to them, “I’m very sad. It’s as if I’m dying. Stay here and keep alert.” ³⁵ Then he went a short distance farther and fell to the ground. He prayed that, if possible, he might be spared the time of suffering. ³⁶ He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible. Take this cup of suffering away from me. However—not what I want but what you want.” ³⁷ He came and found them sleeping. He said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Couldn’t you stay alert for one hour? ³⁸ Stay alert and pray so that you won’t give in to temptation. The spirit is eager, but the flesh is weak.” ³⁹ Again, he left them and prayed, repeating the same words. ⁴⁰ And, again, when he came back, he found them sleeping, for they couldn’t keep their eyes open, and they didn’t know how to respond to him. ⁴¹ He came a third time and said to them, “Will you sleep and rest all night? That’s enough! The time has come for the Human One^[a] to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴² Get up! Let’s go! Look, here comes my betrayer.” ⁴³ Suddenly, while Jesus was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, came with a mob carrying swords and clubs. They had been sent by the chief priests, legal experts, and elders. ⁴⁴ His betrayer had given them a sign: “Arrest the man I kiss, and take him away under guard.” ⁴⁵ As soon as he got there, Judas said to Jesus, “Rabbi!” Then he kissed him. ⁴⁶ Then they came and grabbed Jesus and arrested him. ⁴⁷ One of the bystanders drew a sword and struck the high priest’s slave and cut off his ear. ⁴⁸ Jesus responded, “Have you come with swords and clubs to arrest me, like an outlaw? ⁴⁹ Day after day, I was with you, teaching in the temple, but you didn’t arrest me. But let the scriptures be fulfilled.” ⁵⁰ And all his disciples left him and ran away.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: His disciples were present, but weren’t particularly “with” Jesus in his hour of anguish.

Jesus gave so much to his disciples, but when he needed them, they failed him.

They had interned with him for three years, traveling from village to town through many middles of nowhere. They heard his words of hope, forgiveness, kindness. They saw him engage with popular people and rejected people, old and young people, powerful and common people, hale and ailing people. They strove to adopt the life of prayer and trust that he modeled for them.

When his career path finally had brought Jesus to the big city, the disciples still followed, eyes and mouths open wide at the sights and sounds and the crowds of Jerusalem—more people than they had ever seen in one place. As the Jewish observance of the Passover approached, Jesus had charged two disciples to make arrangements so they all could celebrate as was the custom. They found a place—an upper room—and arranged for someone to provide their meal.

So it was that on that night Jesus cemented the bond they had with one another at a testimonial dinner. But to their surprise—indeed, shock—Jesus’ testimony was not one affirming the friendship he had with them, or celebrating how he had seen their faith blossom in their time together. No, the testimony Jesus shared that night was that one in their midst would become a turncoat, spurning their mutual loyalty, undermining the

profound reliance they had developed one for another. At some point one of the disciples slipped away from the upper room in order to trigger the plot of betrayal.

Jesus led the other disciples down the hill to a favorite public garden called Gethsemane where they had often gathered. "Sit here while I pray," he said to them, then without making a big deal of it he beckoned Peter, James and John to step away and come with him. "Stay here and keep alert," he said, for overwhelming sadness was killing him. He went a bit further, and prayed with the most heart-felt earnestness: "Abba, Father, if it's at all possible, spare me the approaching suffering. But whatever, your will, not mine, be done."

Jesus returned to the three, only to find that the lateness of the hour and the evening's plentiful wine had allowed sleep to defeat their attempt to stay alert. This happened once, twice.... By the third time, Jesus was resigned to the reality that even his closest mates fell short. They fell short of the dependable friendship that he needed on that night—a night that was awash in sadness and dread, anxiety and futility.

What was worse, when the betrayal was manifested by the traitor's kiss and brute force took control of the situation, as Jesus was bound and led away, all of Jesus' close friends and confidants disappeared into the darkness, running away from their master and friend, their teacher and Lord.

Fellow disciples, how stalwart are we?

- When our loyalty to living for Christ is threatened by ridicule of our neighbors...
- When our loyalty to living for Christ is challenged by the cost to our pocketbook...
- When our loyalty to living for Christ is tested by the inconvenience it imposes on our schedules...
- When our loyalty to living for Christ is simply ignored by the society in which we live...

...will we be found still at his side, befriending him, defending him? Or like Peter and James and John and the others, will we, too, run away?