

The Same Old Prayer

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
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- Matthew 26:36-56 (Contemporary English Version) ³⁶ Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane. When they got there, he told them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” ³⁷ Jesus took along Peter and the two brothers, James and John. He was very sad and troubled, ³⁸ and he said to them, “I am so sad that I feel as if I am dying. Stay here and keep awake with me.” ³⁹ Jesus walked on a little way. Then he knelt with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, don’t make me suffer by having me drink from this cup. But do what you want, and not what I want.” ⁴⁰ He came back and found his disciples sleeping. So he said to Peter, “Can’t any of you stay awake with me for just one hour? ⁴¹ Stay awake and pray that you won’t be tested. You want to do what is right, but you are weak.” ⁴² Again Jesus went to pray and said, “My Father, if there is no other way, and I must suffer, I will still do what you want.” ⁴³ Jesus came back and found them sleeping again. They simply could not keep their eyes open. ⁴⁴ He left them and prayed the same prayer once more. ⁴⁵ Finally, Jesus returned to his disciples and said, “Are you still sleeping and resting? The time has come for the Son of Man to be handed over to sinners. ⁴⁶ Get up! Let’s go. The one who will betray me is already here.” ⁴⁷ Jesus was still speaking, when Judas the betrayer came up. He was one of the twelve disciples, and a large mob armed with swords and clubs was with him. They had been sent by the chief priests and the nation’s leaders. ⁴⁸ Judas had told them ahead of time, “Arrest the man I greet with a kiss.” ⁴⁹ Judas walked right up to Jesus and said, “Hello, teacher.” Then Judas kissed him. ⁵⁰ Jesus replied, “My friend, why are you here?” The men grabbed Jesus and arrested him. ⁵¹ One of Jesus’ followers pulled out a sword. He struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. ⁵² But Jesus told him, “Put your sword away. Anyone who lives by fighting will die by fighting. ⁵³ Don’t you know that I could ask my Father, and right away he would send me more than twelve armies of angels? ⁵⁴ But then, how could the words of the Scriptures come true, which say that this must happen?” ⁵⁵ Jesus said to the mob, “Why do you come with swords and clubs to arrest me like a criminal? Day after day I sat and taught in the temple, and you didn’t arrest me. ⁵⁶ But all this happened, so that what the prophets wrote would come true.” All of Jesus’ disciples left him and ran away.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Our prayers can gift us with the blessing of acceptance.

“Gethsemane” is not just a strange name. It’s a thing. In the ancient language of Aramaic “gethsemane” means “oil press.” An oil press extracted oil from olives to be used in cooking or medicines or cosmetics, or as fuel for lamps or for use in religious ceremonies. It makes sense that there was an oil press located in the valley at the foot of the Mount of Olives; that way the harvested crop could be dragged down the hill and processed. The area took on the name of its central feature: the oil press, “Gethsemane.” When Jesus sought a place of solitude, of quiet after the Last Supper, he took his disciples to the oil press, to “Gethsemane” because at night the press wouldn’t have been in operation.

When you visit Gethsemane today, you see a large, beautiful, modern church that’s been built over a rock traditionally identified as the place where Jesus prayed. Just outside the church is a fenced-in grove of thirteen olive trees that have been determined to be at least 900 years old. For olive trees, as some branches die off, other shoots emerge, resulting in trees with massive, gnarled trunks. And since olive trees can grow back from the roots even after they’ve been cut down, researchers don’t rule out the possibility that these old, old trees may have come from trees that were present during Jesus’ lifetime.¹ In ancient times the whole hillside would have been covered in olive trees.

Jesus sought out this place outside the city walls in order to have some privacy. He was accompanied by eleven of the apostles. They settled in a comfortable spot in the grove of olive trees. Then

¹ Naomi O’Leary, “Olive Trees of Gethsemane Among Oldest in World: Study.” Reuters October 19, 2012 at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-trees/olive-trees-of-gethsemane-among-oldest-in-world-study-idUSBRE89I0ZQ20121019> accessed 4/17/2019

Jesus asked Peter, James and John to step away with him a short distance. There, apart from the others, Jesus became overwhelmed. Motioning them to stay, he went off a bit farther to pray. He didn't ask Peter, James and John to do anything in particular. He just wanted to know that they were there, nearby, there for him. So it was hard, disappointing that when he returned from his moments of private prayer he found them dozing, seemingly not aware of or not caring about his state of emotional and spiritual turmoil.

Jesus stepped away from them to pray... and again, and a third time. He bared his soul to his Heavenly Father. His prayer asked if it was at all possible that he could be spared from the impending brutality and humiliation. That showed his true, full humanity: hoping to avoid pain and hardship. And then his prayer pivoted – it pivoted toward the obedience that was the sign of his true divinity.

His prayer pivoted on a word. Various Bible translations use various words – “*however...*,” “*but...*,” “*yet...*,” “*nevertheless...*”

Jesus prayed, “*And yet, not what I want but what you want.*” Again, various Bible translations express that prayer using various phrases – “*Thy will be done...*,” “*Your will be done...*,” “*Do it your way...*,” “*Let it be what you want.*”

Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus prayed that prayer the first time, and the second time, and again the third time: “*If it's possible, spare me this fate. Nevertheless, not what I want; may what you want be accomplished.*” The same prayer, three times. Did Jesus think that repetition would wear down God's resolve, like a small child insistently, repetitively asking her parent for a treat? I don't think so.

So what can we take away from the example of Jesus praying this most heartfelt prayer?

First, he took his hope, his fear, his uncertainty, his life – he took it all to God in prayer. He laid it before the Lord. He didn't worry if his prayer was proper or worthy or timely or phrased “just so.” He took what was on his heart and simply said, “Here it is, God. Here's what I'm dealing with. Guide me in this moment as you've been my guide my whole life long.” That's the first thing we can take from the agony in Gethsemane.

The second thing we should notice is that Jesus wanted some solitude, but not complete solitude. He was overcome by intense emotion; he prayed so fervently that, in one gospel account, the sweat on his brow became “like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground.”² He wanted some privacy, but he didn't want to be alone.

That shouldn't surprise us. His desire to have his friends near is a common experience. Actually, it makes me think of Parker the Dog. Our dog Parker often like to engage us in playing with his squeak toys, or being chased around the house, or playing tug-of-war with some of his chew toys. But there are other times that Parker just hops up onto the sofa where Mary is grading papers, or he joins me on the recliner where he'll position himself next to my legs, sometimes laying his chin on my ankle. He's not asking us to do anything. He just wants to be with us; he just wants to know that we're nearby. Even Jesus wanted his friends close by in this time of extremity. He needed to know that they were there for them. Our friends, our loved ones sometimes simply need to know that we are there for them during whatever they're going through.

And the third thing we can take from the Gethsemane story is what prayer did for Jesus and what prayer can do for us. Jesus saw the signs that the threats were coming to a head. Jesus honestly pleaded to be able to avoid the approaching confrontation. He lifted up that very prayer once, twice, three times. But putting his trust in God in prayer enabled Jesus to prepare to accept the fate that awaited him. Jesus could have fled and remained hidden, exiled, at least for a time. But he didn't opt for that. His prayerful communion with God gave him a spirit of acceptance. His prayer did not spare him humiliation or disappointment. His prayer did not shield him from pain. His prayer led him along a path so that, by God's gracious compassion and love, Jesus was able to accept the consequence of his life, his work, his character.

So from Jesus offering the same old prayer three times we may discover that acceptance can be the blessing that results from our prayerful communion with God. For because Jesus gave himself in prayer to God, because he trusted God completely, Jesus was given the gift of acceptance – humbly submitting so that God's will would be done.

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² Luke 22:44 Revised Standard Version (alternate reading)