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“Reimagined: Prayer”

Part IX of the Sermon Series, “Reimagined.”

Mark 14:32-42

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Mark 14:32-42

³² They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, ‘Sit here while I pray.’ ³³He took with him Peter and James and John and began to be distressed and agitated. ³⁴And he said to them, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.’ ³⁵And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. ³⁶He said, ‘Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.’ ³⁷He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, ‘Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? ³⁸Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.’ ³⁹And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. ⁴⁰And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. ⁴¹He came a third time and said to them, ‘Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son



of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴²Get up, let us be going.'

Sermon

What is the most honest prayer you have ever uttered? Think about it. What is the most honest prayer you have ever prayed?

- Maybe it's the prayer you prayed as you held your breath and answered that late night phone call when your kid wasn't home yet.
- Maybe it's the prayer you spit out as you slammed on your brakes and hoped they'd stop the car in time.
- Perhaps it's the words you whispered before the doctor shared your results.
- Or the serenity prayer you gave in the driveway as your kids fought and screamed and kicked the seat behind you.
- Or maybe it's that prayer you prayed to calm your nerves before the final test, the final interview, or the walk down the aisle.

How much of your life has been hemmed in prayer?

Often in the Gospels, we find Jesus going out alone to pray. The crowds ask so much of him. People followed him where he went. They wanted healing, they wanted wisdom, they wanted grace. And from time to time, we read in the gospels that Jesus had to get away to a deserted place. He had to communicate with the Father. Perhaps he had to raise his own petitions to God, restore his weary mind, refill his cup.

Often in scripture, we find Jesus going out alone to pray. But this time he takes three friends. He needs time alone, yet also wants his friends close by. He needs time in prayer, and he also needs the company of others.

Rarely do we get a glimpse of his words in prayer. This time he prays, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible..." These may be among the most excruciating words in Scripture. They express Jesus' deep, almost secret hope. This hope is deep because it comes from the core of Jesus' being – from a deep desire that there may be another ending to this story than the one hurtling toward him.

His hope is also secret. Sometimes we keep secrets because we don't want other people to know—something we've done; something we want; someone we love. But sometimes we keep secrets because we don't want ourselves to know. We don't want to admit how deeply and desperately we hope for something to happen—or not to happen – because we fear that if we acknowledge it, what we hope might not be



realized. If we keep our most unbelievable hopes deep down inside, secret even from ourselves, then we insulate ourselves from the painful possibility that it might forever elude us.

“Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me...”

Here we see a young man who does not want to die.

I had a hard time finding a good commentary to explain clearly that Jesus is afraid. So quickly, we want to skip over how genuinely grieved Jesus is. But here in Gethsemane, we get a picture of what incarnation—literally, “in the flesh”—looks like. Jesus, God’s Son, is anxious, troubled, grieved, and afraid. Can this really be God’s only Son, the Word made flesh? If so, he makes a poor comparison with the other gods of the ancient world, gods of power and might, gods of dreadful vengeance and terrible wrath.

These depictions are not what we expect from God, perhaps not even what we want. We want to move swiftly from “if it is possible, let this cup pass from me” to the faithful “not what I want, Lord, but what you want.” But in this moment, in Gethsemane, we hear Jesus pray like we pray when we are distraught, grieved, and afraid.

My very good friend Rachel is a hospital chaplain in Georgia. Early on in the pandemic, Rachel’s job shifted quickly from her regular chaplaincy duties to simply holding an iPad. Hour after hour, she held the iPad as family members said goodbye to the patient by Rachel’s side in the COVID ICU unit. Not allowed to have visitors on the floor, family members were never ready for this final conversation to take place over a screen. It was excruciating. One day, a son was on the screen and ready to say goodbye to his elderly mother—but when Rachel held the screen, the man couldn’t utter a word. It wasn’t unusual for Rachel to have to walk the iPad into the corner of the room and give the family members on the screen a little pep talk, encouraging them to say some words of love and comfort aloud that their loved one might hear and recognize their voice. This particular patient’s son cried out to Rachel over the screen, “I don’t like it, saying goodbye like this. I don’t like it!” Rachel said that was the very same prayer she prayed as she walked into her hospital each day, “I don’t like it, Lord. I don’t like it.”

How often in our suffering has our essential cry been, “I don’t want this; I don’t like this”? That is Jesus’ prayer. It is not an inappropriate prayer or an unfaithful prayer. And it’s not one that needs to be hurried up so that we can get to a prayer that sounds more theologically polite.



Our impulse is to move onto the silver lining, to the safer territory of “closure,” acceptance, and reconciliation. “I don’t want it; I don’t like it?” – that is scary territory.

This is the only time in Mark we see the name for God “Abba.” It is the most intimate name for addressing God. It unveils something for us about the personal nature of the relationship between Jesus and the Father. “Abba, Father,” he prays. All night long he is up wrestling with his fear. All night long, the disciples (who likewise were told to pray and prepare) drift off to sleep.

Jesus prayed for a long time, his disciples grew weary of waiting and couldn’t keep awake. Three times he went away to pray – and three times he returned back to Peter, James, and John and found them sleeping. Three times.

Jesus has already made his prediction that three times Peter will deny him. In Peter, we often find our mirror. One who wants to be so faithful and strong, and yet succumbs to sleep, succumbs to denial. We are forced to ask ourselves; how often do we fall asleep to the needs of our neighbor? How often do we drown out their anguish with our own distraction? When has the Lord asked us to keep alert, keep awake, and be ready?

“Not what I want, but what you want,” he prays.

Jesus is not surrendering simply to his fate, or whatever else we may want to call it. Jesus is surrendering to God, to his Father, Abba. And surrender is different than capitulation. He is not simply obeying his Father; he is surrendering himself to his Father’s mercy as well as his will.

Certainly, we can read these words as the epitome of obedience and hold them up as standard and measurement. But what if, instead, we imagine them as the recognition that now that his hopes and fears have been said aloud, shared with his Father, he can surrender himself to the mercy and love of that Father. In a way, his words mimic his action: having thrown himself to the ground in honest prayer, he can now throw himself onto the mercy of the One for whom all things are possible.

I am curious about whether we would say Jesus’ prayer was “answered.”

In the casual way we use that phrase, I think we’d have to argue that it wasn’t. In this he joins all of us who have prayed to escape suffering, prayed for healing, prayed for a way through, only to face the very suffering, disease, or dead end we feared.



“Yet not what I want, but what you want,” Lord. Jesus comes to want what God wants. Perhaps here we have an image of prayer changing the one praying rather than changing God or external circumstances.

Prayer changes the person offering the prayer.

For Jesus, for us, to know that we can be wholly honest with ourselves, and our fears is an incredible feat. Prayer is a genuine dialogue with somebody who’s on the other end of the conversation. Walter Brueggemann says we spend a lot of energy trying to assess the psychological benefits of prayer (like “families that pray together stay together”), but to think that we dare be in conversation with the Creator of heaven and earth is a mind-boggling claim. It is the ultimate conviction that we are not alone in the world.

The miracle in Gethsemane is that God is present. The miracle in the simple act of our daily prayer is that God is present. That God cares about me—that God cares about you.

What is the most honest prayer you have ever prayed? You can rest assured God hears it. God is with you in it. God will be with you through whatever comes to pass.

As we prepare to offer our earnest prayers for this community and the world, may we be reminded that God not only hears the words we utter, God is with us—God’s Spirit accompanies us—God is as close as our own breath.

