

Luke 22:39-46
Preserving Prayers
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Researchers have determined that nearly 95% of our daily functioning takes place at an unconscious level. Our bodies literally know how to carry on without any input on our part whatsoever. There may be a few wives in the congregation who are thinking 95% might be a little low.

However, there are pivotal moments in our lives when the active cognition part of our brains to kicks in, because something important is about to happen. As a child, I knew, my dad was capable of anything. Whether it was a project for school, home repair, troubleshooting an issue with the car, or maintaining some piece of useful sporting equipment. And I remember moments when he would say something like this: come with me, I need to show you something. In these moments, I knew, something important was about to come my way.

This morning we are skipping forward a bit in our study of Luke's Gospel, to a pivotal moment just after Jesus celebrated his last supper with the disciples. Outside of the walled city of Jerusalem, to the east is what's known as the Kidron Valley. Crossing through the valley you then begin to climb the Mount of Olives, where even today, there are Olive Trees that have been there since Jesus' day. Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus invites his disciples to join him on the Mount of Olives in the Garden of Gethsemane for what will be a crucial moment.

Throughout this season of Lent, we will look at the part of Jesus' life and ministry that receives more attention than any other—his journey to the cross. And what you will see in these final hours and days is that Jesus endures profoundly relatable dilemmas. In spite of his identity as God, Jesus' humanity in these final moments is altogether relatable to every one of us. And through these we are invited to learn and grow in our walk with God.

This morning the question I would like to place before us is simply this: In the face of life's challenges, what do you know more intimately: the struggle you face, or the God who is with you?

So, if you would, take out or turn on your copy of Scripture, or you may turn your attention to the screens where we've made our text available to you. And as you are able, would you please stand with me as we listen to the word of God.

And he came out and went, as was his custom, to the mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. And when he came to the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation." And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. And when he rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping for sorrow, and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation."

You wouldn't embark upon a major challenge or event with first preparing? Of course not. Unless you were my dear friend Will our sophomore year of College. One Sunday morning Will woke to go spectate the Twin Cities Marathon. Taking his place among the crowds at mile two, watching as waves of runners passed by, Will thought to himself: "You know, I'd really rather be a runner than a spectator." So, with absolutely no training, Will hopped out onto the course and proceeded to complete the remaining 24 miles of the race, with no training. I don't even think he had running shoes on that day. Miraculously, he finished, his reward, stress fractures in his feet.

Just as we prepare our bodies for physical testing, our spiritual training is no different. You wouldn't run a marathon or lift heavy weights without first spending time running short distances or lifting light weights. So too, living a life of faith and obedience to Christ requires practice and preparation as well. Not even Jesus, God's Son, lived without prayer. He invites you to join him in cultivating a life of prayer. Prayer, and time of solitude with the Father, was the fuel that enabled him to face the challenging terrain of his ministry.

In his book *Margin* author Richard Swenson describes the epidemic of hurriedness and over-commitment in our culture, and the lack of time set aside for solitude and prayer. Margin is that space on the page of a book where nothing is written, blank space, empty space that is available for the creative Word of God to fill with his presence. Margin, he writes is what is missing. He says: "The conditions of modern-day living devour margin. If you are homeless, we send you to a shelter. If you are penniless, we offer you food stamps. If you are breathless, we connect you to oxygen. But if you are marginless, we give you yet one more thing to do. The condition of marginlessness is being thirty minutes late to the doctor because you were twenty minutes late getting out of the bank because you were ten minutes late dropping the kids off at school because the car ran out of gas two blocks from the gas station—and you forgot your wallet."

Does this sound like the kind of life that is open to the creative and transformative work of God? Are our lives so full that we struggle to even find an inch for God fit in?

If you are hearing me and thinking to yourself: "geez my life is already so hurried and harried, now preacher is asking me to take on one more thing," then you are hearing me wrong. What God is inviting you to experience through periods of prayer and solitude is an opening up of our lives, not only to see ourselves rightly, but to allow God to change places with us, taking His rightful place on the throne of our lives.

Prayer is not a task to schedule, it is a gift that enables us to see our schedules, our appointments, our challenges, our heart. "Solitude Henri Nouwen writes: is the furnace of transformation. Without solitude we remain victims of our society and continue to be entangled in the illusions of the false self. Solitude and prayer is different from private therapeutic experiences. Rather it is the place of conversion, where the old self dies and the new self is born, it's the place where the emergence of the new man is born."

People clamored to be near to Jesus, to receive from him all they could, it was amazing! But each time encounters of healing and instruction took place, it was always followed by retreating to a place of prayer and solitude. It was as he was alone with God that he was able to hear clearly the voice of his Father, the one that said at his Baptism that he was his beloved. There are so many messages and labels the world will want to stick to you, prayer and solitude with God is thing that enables you hear clearly who you are.

After inviting the disciples to remain with him in prayer Jesus withdraws from them a little way and in his prayer time Jesus pours out his heart. He actually expressed his hesitancy and concern about going to the cross. Father if you are willing, remove this cup from me. The image of the cup is described as God's wrath being poured out. Jesus knows that what is ahead for him is nothing less than the full weight of God's wrath for the world's sin that will land squarely on his shoulders. And Jesus says, I don't want to do it, if there's any other way Lord let it be so. The text we have says that Jesus was so overcome by anxiety and fear that his sweat became like drops of blood. We don't know if Jesus literally sweat blood, because the text is using simile here, but the point Luke is making is that in this moment Jesus was undergoing a period of unimaginable stress and fear.

One of the most dangerous and horrible misconceptions about Christianity is that real Christians don't get scared or depressed, or that it's a sign of weakness to hurt like this. What we have before us in Luke 22 is Jesus, the one whom the bible says is the maker of all things, grieved and worried to the point where he is sweating blood. What does this say about those who are going through this kind of anxiety and depression? What does this say about those who are in the throes of this kind of experience?

Well, what we see from the Gospels is that Jesus does much more than simply offer his "thoughts and prayers." When his people are in need, even though he pleads with the Father, "there must be another way?" In spite of his fear, Jesus is moved to action. Jesus doesn't wait for something to happen, he moves into the center of our deepest need, to the point of life and death, and Jesus does the work only he can. Jesus does the hard thing, sacrificing his preference so that his people would know mercy. When we were too stubborn and obstinate to know that God is reach out to them, Jesus became the man of action. Jesus is well acquainted with the grief we know, and his heart was broken again this week all over again. But Jesus doesn't only remain in our grief, helpless and weak. The needs of his world move Jesus to action, to enact change that would forever preserve the lives of his people.

Because Jesus knows what it means to be grieved deeply, to suffer alongside his people, the bible says he is able to support us in our afflictions. The book of Hebrews says that **we have a great high priest who is able to sympathize with us in our sufferings, because he in every respect was tested himself.**

Jesus became like us in every respect so that he could help us in every respect. But at the same moment where we see Jesus at his most human and vulnerable, I think we also see Jesus in his divinity as well. I wonder if the most powerful evidence for his divinity and power is in his giving up his power and authority. I wonder if the greatest thing about Jesus in this moment is his acquiescence to people who do not deserve it. Jesus is setting aside his rights, his power, his authority, and giving up on anything that seems fair. He's giving up on the power that is available to him as the one who created heaven and earth.

When I was in seminary I had a New Testament Professor who taught me the Bible, and some Greek. But the greatest lesson he taught me took place one evening when he was a part of a panel discussion. After he spoke there was a fellow student who, rather rudely, stood up and berated him leveling accusations about his theology, calling him all sorts of horrible names. It was really a disgraceful and immature act. After this student sat down, the moderator of the panel offered Dr Wagner the chance to respond. He immediately stood up, and we were getting ready for him to verbally dress this student down, putting him in his place—which he would have been entirely

justified in doing. But instead he paused, collected himself and said, I don't wish to respond, these are his opinions, and they're his. He had all the power to come out victorious, but instead chose to give up that power and instead show mercy.

The Apostle Paul writes in Philippians 2:6-8 **though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,^[b] ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant,^[c] being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.**

The reason Jesus himself, retreated away from the crowds regularly for times of prayer and solitude, the reason he invited his disciples to join him there, and the reason he invites you and me to make margin, prayer, and solitude a part of daily our lives with him is so that, when the world is closing in on us we would not look to our circumstances but instead we would look to the God who is over them. That when we're in the pit of despair, his hand reaches down with strength and mercy and love and courage and lifts us to know that God is more willing to come to us in our struggle than we are to ask. Jesus is the faithful one, Jesus is the man of sorrows who entered our world to share our burdens, who became sin—even though he knew no sin—so that we would receive his righteousness. Jesus looked Rome in the eye, he looked squarely at the religious establishment and with his actions declared, there is yet another way. My way. The way of prayer. The way of submission. The way of peace in the face of violence. The way of the Father.

If you are feeling the weight of the world on your shoulders, do what Jesus did, step away for a time, meet God in prayer. You cannot love your family, you cannot do your job or lead your team, you cannot accomplish your goal in your own strength. God has a big task ahead of us. The Kingdom he is calling us to prepare for, and point to is being assaulted on all fronts these days. But if you think that Jesus is thinking to himself, gee I don't know how we're going to get out of this one. He's way ahead of you. In fact he's given you the tools and the blueprints for facing every challenge.

But like Jesus the only way we can meet the challenge, is if we first know the God of all peace.

Prayer, solitude, time alone with God is not another thing to add to your calendar, it's the one thing that is necessary that will bring clarity purpose to your calendar, to your commitments

7 years ago Amy and I were living in our previous community, and serving the church there. And one night I received the most heartbreaking phone call imaginable. A 25 year old single mother of two had been in a car accident on her way home from a volleyball game. She and her boyfriend were killed immediately. And that night I was called over to the home of her mother who was there with her 3 and 5 year old daughters. There literally were no words that I knew to say in this situation. It was beyond my worst nightmare, and all we could do in that moment was simply sit with this family. After 20 or 30 minutes of stunned silence, Dee—that was the mother's name—spoke up, and asked this question: “Does God know what I'm feeling?”

And in my mind I went to this scene. As this mother desperately wanted this bitter cup to be taken from her, I thought about Jesus, in agony, feeling the weight of the world on his shoulders, and I said to her “yes, Jesus knows what you are feeling, not as some omnipotent and remote deity who sees all and knows all, but as a brother, like us in every way, even to the point of experiencing the very depth of human sorrow and pain. The Father knows what you are feeling, because he too endured profound loss. Yes God knows what you are feeling.

It is a sad reality that some Christians believe that depression is not allowed, because it keeps them from the liberating knowledge of Jesus' tender mercies and his understanding of what it is like to be completely undone on the inside.

Jesus Christ knows what it means to be depressed and sad, and if there is anyone within the sound of my voice who is experiencing these feeling, to push them away would be to push Jesus away as well. And because Jesus experienced this he can support us in our afflictions. The book of Hebrews says that **we have a great high priest who is able to sympathize with us in our sufferings, because he in every respect was tested himself.**