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Praying With the Stars IV – “Not My Favorite”

Matthew 26:36-44 New Revised Standard Version Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.” Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” Again he went away for the second time and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words.

John 21:15-18 New Revised Standard Version When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.”

We tend to pay a certain special attention to “last words.” There’s a phrase about “famous last words” and many books and websites have sought to compile folks’ real or purported final statements. As I understand the law, there are even some exemptions to some of the protections around hearsay if they involve end-of-life, deathbed last words. Now, we don’t pay the same sort attention to everyday, run-of-

the-mill words amidst the deluge of words that we speak or hear in a day, there are no sayings about “famous middle words.” So this morning, these two passages from two different gospels have in common that they both highlight some “last words” - or near to last words, anyway – of Jesus. Our first scripture is those haunting words from Matthew’s gospel recording Jesus last moments as a free man on the last night of his earthly life, a poignant prayer that is the topic for this latest in our sermon series “Praying With the Stars.” The second scripture is from John’s gospel and describes part of a conversation that the Risen Jesus had with his disciple Peter after the resurrection but right before He, according to tradition, ascended into heaven. So, in both these scriptures, we have a form of “last words” that capture something important that Jesus wants to make sure His followers know.

So let’s turn to that night in the Garden of Gethsemane and Jesus’ powerful prayer. Remember the circumstances: it had been a long, tumultuous emotional roller coaster of a week. It began on Sunday with that triumphal entry into Jerusalem with the acclaim of the crowds shouting “Hosanna!” and had continued on this day with Jesus celebrating the Passover meal with his disciples, the discovery at that meal that Judas had betrayed him to the Roman authorities, and an anguished time afterwards before his arrest in that garden when he prayed a prayer to God that every one of us has prayed, I suspect, in one version or another, at some time or another: *“Let this cup pass from me.”* We know that prayer. We’ve prayed that prayer while waiting for test results. We’ve prayed it on behalf of a friend or a child or going through hell. We’ve prayed it at silly times “O Lord, let the teacher cancel this test that I haven’t studied for” and we’ve prayed it at scary or sad times. We’ve prayed it in situations where every alternative is

not good. “Let this cup pass.” *Get me out of this. Remove me from this situation. Make it go away, make it go away.* When Barbara’s and my children were small, we tried to teach them, when faced with unfamiliar food that someone put in front of them, that instead of saying something like “Eeeew. Gross” that it would be more polite to say “It’s not my favorite.” Well, every one of us has had and will have again situations and decisions and choices that are much, much more freighted and momentous than being faced with icky unwanted broccoli, but we can surely say that these times are not our favorite either and we wish, indeed, that they could also pass us by!

So, as we reflect on such moments in our own lives and as we reflect on Jesus’ profoundly poignant prayer, what can we learn about the life of faith and about God? Let me suggest three things:

First, sometimes life takes us into places and situations and confronts us with choices that we never expected nor wanted. Now, as our teenagers used to say, “Well, duh!” Or as a professor of mine used to rubber-stamp on certain passages of papers his students had written, a stamp you did not want to get: “Penetrating Glance Into the Obvious.” But “duh” moment or not, the first step to faithfully living our lives in each moment is to honestly acknowledge the nature of the moment before us. In other words, denial of what we’re really facing can never help us be attuned to how God is moving in our lives. The old joke about the little girl who found a pile of manure in her backyard on Christmas morning and began gleefully and happily shoveling through it and shouting “*There must be a pony here somewhere!*” is funny and charming but her delirious digging will not unearth any ponies, and will only tire her out and leave her more dispirited. The extent to which you and are capable of denial, of saying “pony

pony pony pony” in the face of something that we *know* promises no ponies can keep us from truly moving forward. So, as Christians we acknowledge indeed: *sometimes life takes us into places and situations and confronts us with choices that we never expected nor wanted.*

Second, *sometimes the situation before us, the cup that is **not** going to pass from us, is partly our own doing.* By the time that Jesus offered his anguished prayer he had crossed a line that he knew would bring the unwelcome attentions of imperial Rome. Whether Judas had betrayed him or not, when Jesus chose to be a part of that triumphal entry into Jerusalem, knowing that the crowds would hail him a king, he knew that the Roman authorities and their local puppet rulers would take notice and take action. By allowing Himself to be proclaimed king in the midst of a week when the city is full of folks from the outlying areas come to celebrate Passover – a crowd from the Roman point of view that could turn into an insurrectionist army – Jesus Himself crossed a line that would put him in direct confrontation with the authorities. Sometimes our prayer, “*Let this cup pass,*” then, is more on the order, really, of an expression of regret: “*Oh, how I wish I hadn’t done the things that put me in this situation.*” And sometimes, by the time we pray that prayer – “*Make it go away!*” – it is simply the case that that is not possible. You see, as Barbara Blaisdell so aptly puts it, God created a world where everything – everything! -- has some degree of freedom: viruses and molecules and tectonic plates and human beings as evil as Herod and as good as a Mother Teresa. And because that is the case every one of us has sometimes prayed a prayer that did not get answered in the way that we had hoped. And sometimes, we need to acknowledge that our own freely chosen actions have

helped to put us in the situation where we regret and wish for some magical way to undo our actions and the actions of others. But there is no magic and that cup is still there before us.

But this inevitably must lead us to the question: Why then **do** we pray that prayer? Why did *Jesus* pray his prayer? If life takes us places that we did not wish to go – oh-so-eloquently put when the post-resurrection Jesus tells Peter that one day he will be taken where he does not want to go, to his own martyrdom on a cross – and if our actions and the actions of others have contributed to bringing us to that state of affairs, why then **do** we pray, why did *Jesus* pray, “Let this cup pass”?

Here’s the reason, I believe, and it’s the third point about prayer that I want to make this morning: *Prayer is not simply a matter of requesting things from God. It is a matter of becoming more attuned to the highest possibilities, possibilities that you may not have thought of, in a given moment.* St. Paul reminds us that God works through all things to bring about the good that is possible, and sometimes our own anger, or fear, or worry can keep us from seeing the good that God is trying to offer us. It may not be exactly what we are praying for – “*Get me out of here!*” – but it will be possibilities that we may never have thought of before. The prophet Elijah famously said that God comes to us in a “still, small voice” and prayer is a way of quieting the noise within us and around us so that we can hear what God is offering to us. We all know the saying, “Prayer Changes Things.” Well, what I am suggesting is that what prayer changes is **us**. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are very honest writing about Jesus, they portray Him as not only the Son of God but as completely human as well. And his prayer in that garden on that night is an example, I believe, of how He in fact opened Himself up to

God. There might have been time yet for Him to run away, flee, hide out from what he had started - and who would have blamed Him?!? But He did not. He chose to become attuned to the fact that through Him God would make manifest the reality that not even the worst of human sin and mendacity, not even death itself could ever defeat or destroy God's love.

And prayer can change us too. It can offer us possibilities that we didn't know were there. God can find us with a sense of peace that we never could have found on our own. Through becoming attuned to God more fully through our praying, we can become aware of new ways forward that we just weren't aware of. Prayer changes things, and it can change us.

A few years ago, Clint Eastwood made a movie in which he starred called "Gran Torino." Now, I ordinarily would likely not be citing Clint Eastwood in a sermon. But this is no ordinary, "Make my day," Eastwood sort of movie. No, it's actually a tale of redemption, a story of a man who was indeed changed in ways that he never could have imagined. I will warn you that it is a disturbing and sometimes violent movie and it is full of language that is coarse and vulgar. The character that Eastwood plays is named Matt Kowalski, and he is not a nice person. And while the film is too honest to have him dubiously transformed into a nice person by the end, he nonetheless becomes a changed person and in its own gritty way, the movie testifies to the power of possibility. The story line is simple. Kowalski is a retired autoworker in urban Detroit. He lives in a neighborhood that has utterly changed around him. His next door neighbors – and most of the neighborhood - are Hmong refugees. Gang activity rampant. The film opens as Kowalski's wife has just died and he is a bitter, racist,

mean, vulgar, angry man, estranged from his children and his church. One day, he finds the teenage boy from next door attempting to steal his beloved 1972 restored Ford Gran Torino. Now, the Clint Eastwood of “Dirty Harry” fame might have had a “make my day” moment here.

But, to make a long story short, Kowalski instead slowly befriends his neighbors, the boy and his extended family. He doesn’t become the perfect man; far from it. But he does change. And through his relationship with a persistent priest from his wife’s church who will not give up on him even though Kowalski initially dismisses him as knowing nothing, he begins to fumblingly find a relationship to something beyond his own resentments and racism, his own anger and outrage. To make a long story short, but not to give away the details in case you want to see for yourself, the sister of the boy who had initially tried to steal Kowalski’s car is beaten and raped and he ends up in a completely unexpected way confronting the gang that did this in such a way that they are taken off the streets for a very long time. I did not see that ending coming, with its power and its poignancy and its allusions, even, to what Jesus did. But through the power of God’s patient and persistent love, through Kowalski’s own tongue-tied attempts to pray and the efforts of others to pray for him in words and actions, this man who hated all those whom he had labeled “gooks” in his neighborhood finds a new possibility for his life and achieves a tremendous, unexpected good.

My friends, sometimes the cup will not pass by. Sometimes there is not a way out in the way that we might hope. But always, always, always, there is God offering possibilities that we didn’t know were possible, offering peace that truly passes our

understanding, offering new ways of reacting to what is happening in our lives that can be more than we could have imagined. And that's why we pray. Amen.