

“Life’s Central Test”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “He said, ‘Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me, yet, not what I want, but what you want’” (Mark 14:36).

Several weeks ago I spent five days on the campus at Princeton Seminary as part of an annual seminar in which I am involved with a number of other ministers. The topic for our readings and discussion was “The Providence of God,” which is a subject that deals with the way that God relates to the created order. The Christian faith has always maintained that God created the world, but that God orders, provides, and cares for human life. To put it another way, the Christian faith affirms that the God whom we worship is a personal God who cares about human life and activity.

One of the most perplexing aspects of this subject has to do with our understanding of the will of God, particularly in light of human tragedies: the death of children or young people, terrible illnesses, handicaps, and other horrible conditions. Some theologians, such as William

Temple, distinguish between God's "intentional will" and God's "permissive will." That is to say, they believe that although God does not intend or wish bad things to happen to people; nevertheless, he allows or permits these things to happen, in order to preserve human freedom.

Other theologians have disagreed. John Calvin, the great Reformer of the Sixteenth Century, did not believe that anything happens apart from the will of God. Calvin was convinced that every drop of rain, every human event, everything in our lives--bad or good--comes from God.

I must admit to you that I struggle with this. One of the members of our group told of a time in which he was working in a Chaplain's office in a hospital. A child had died and he was about to visit the grieving parents. Before his visit with the parents he was told by his supervisor not to tell the parents that this death was the will of God. So when he went into the room, he told the parents that they should understand that this death was not the will of God. To his surprise, the parents responded by saying, "Don't tell us that this isn't the will of God. That is the only hope and consolation we have."

I.

This morning we have read the account in Mark's gospel of Jesus in the place of Gethsemane. It is one of the most moving accounts in all of the Gospels. Mark tells us that on that Thursday evening of Holy Week, Jesus went into a Garden in Jerusalem where he prayed. He took with him three of his disciples: Peter, James, and John. But they could not stay awake with him. So Jesus wrestled with the reality of the death that was facing him. He prayed to God, "If it be possible, let this cup (i.e. this cross) pass from me. Nevertheless...."

The first part of that sentence describes every one of us. Each of us prays that prayer. We want to be spared sickness, sorrow, and death. We want to be spared some difficult decision, some terrible inevitability. Like Jesus we pray, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." Yet the central test of our life is not whether we can pray this prayer, but whether we can take that next step, "nevertheless, not my will, but thy will be done."

In such a context the word "nevertheless" is one of the most memorable words in our vocabulary and it brings Gethsemane close to us. To be sure, Jesus' struggle in the garden was unique, and watching him move from the popularity of the shouting crowds on Palm Sunday to the loneliness of his agony in that Garden, we can only look with awe upon its sacred mystery.

But in another sense, Gethsemane pictures the problem of everyday life. To face for conscience' sake the doing of a duty likely to cost us dearly, to confront a handicap that cripples life or a tragedy that decimates it, and to be able to say, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me, but nevertheless thy will be done." That is a kind of faith for tough times and that is the faith of which I am speaking this morning.

II.

To begin, how we respond to these kinds of situations demonstrates our real faith in God. On Palm Sunday it is not difficult to have faith in God, when everything seems to be going our way, when the crowds shout approval, and life, as it were, places palm branches in our path. Almost anyone can believe in God then. But when life passes from Palm Sunday to Gethsemane, with dangerous duty looming, with a possible cross ahead, and with our heart crying, “Let this cup pass,” then comes the real test.

The Book of Daniel tells the story of Nebuchadnezzar, the great king of Babylon, who made a golden image, and required that all his subjects bow down to it. But there were three Jewish young men who would not bow down to this golden image: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And when the king threatened to throw them into a fiery furnace, if they refused to worship this golden image, they replied, “Be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods, nor worship the golden image which you have set up.” Then they went on to say, “Our God is able to deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden image that you have set up” (Daniel 3:16-19).

There are, you see, two kinds of faith in God. One says “if”--if all goes well, if I am successful, if my children succeed, then I will believe in God. It is the prayer of Jacob, who said, “If God will be with me, if he will keep me in the way I go, if he will give me bread to eat and garments, to wear, then I will trust him.” That is a “fair weather” faith, bargaining with God, insisting that our will be done. But in Gethsemane that kind of faith collapses.

But listen to another kind of faith. It does not begin with the word “if”, but with the word “though.”

“Though he slay me, yet will I trust him” (Job 13:15).

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me”(Psalm 23).

“Though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; the lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge” (Psalm 46).

You see, not on Palm Sunday with its hosannas, but in Gethsemane the real test comes, and there, at the point where fair weather faith goes to pieces, real faith begins to soar. It is going to take that kind of faith to see us through these days. “If it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless....”

III.

Then, too, in Gethsemane it is not only our faith in God that is at stake, it is also our personal character. I don't think we ever find out what kind of person we are on our Palm Sundays; it is in Gethsemane that the mettle of a person is determined.

One of the most moving sermons ever preached was by a Scottish minister whose name was Arthur John Gossip. The sermon was entitled "When Life Tumbles In, What Then?" It was preached in the Beechgrove Church in Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1927, exactly one week after Gossip's wife had died suddenly and unexpectedly. In that sermon Gossip says,

"I do not understand this life of ours. But still less can I comprehend how people in trouble and loss and bereavement can fling away peevishly from the Christian faith. In God's name, fling to what? Have we not lost enough without losing that too?"

Then he goes on to say, "You people in the sunshine may believe the faith, but we in the shadow must believe it. We have nothing else."

Gossip concludes his sermon in this manner. "I don't think you need to be afraid of life. Our hearts are very frail; and there are places where the road is very steep and lonely. But we have a wonderful God. And as Paul puts it, "what can separate us from his love? Not death," he says immediately, pushing that aside at once as the most obvious of all impossibilities.

No, not death. For, standing in the roar of the Jordan, cold to the heart with its dreadful chill, and very conscious of the terror of its rushing, I too, like Hopeful, can call back to you who one day in your turn will have to cross it, "Be of good cheer, my brother, for I feel the bottom, and it is sound."

There is a sense in which Palm Sunday represents success, and Gethsemane, failure. On Palm Sunday the crowds are with us; the world seems to be moving our way; hosannas fill the air; palm branches line the road. In Gethsemane our hopes are dashed, our prayers denied, the forces of evil seem so real. Yet, out of the worlds of Gethsemane have come the greatest lives we have ever known.

IV.

Then, too, if we are going to find a faith that will see us through the Gethsemanes of life, it will be because we have found a devotion to something that is greater than ourselves. That is what Jesus discovered. He prayed, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me." But then he prayed, "Not my will, but thy will be done." Jesus belonged to something--to the will of God. He was more than himself. He was himself plus what he had given himself to and what he stood for; on behalf of which he was prepared to die.

One of the most remarkable testaments of the bitter days of World War II is found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*. It is a collection of letters, essays, and poems that Bonhoeffer wrote while he was in prison and which were smuggled out to his friend Eberhard Bethge. Bonhoeffer was hanged by the Gestapo on April 9, 1945 at the prison in Flossenbug, Germany.

Shortly before his death Bonhoeffer wrote a poem he entitled "Who Am I?" in which he expressed his own struggles in the face of death. The poem goes in part:

"Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell's confinement
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a squire from his country house.
Who am I? They often tell me
I would talk to my wardens
freely and friendly and clearly,
as if it were mine to command.

Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I know of myself,
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
Struggling for breath, as though hands were
Compressing my throat, yearning for colours, for
For flowers, for the voices of birds;

Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of
Mine. Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am
Thine."

Once again we stand at the beginning of another Holy Week and find ourselves a part of this great drama. We have had our Palm Sundays, when the air was filled with hosannas and all was well, but now our lives have moved to a Gethsemane that takes in the whole world.

Sometimes I wonder what it would have looked like, if we had been there. Would we have doubted? Now we see the footprints--Caiaphas gone, Pilate gone, empires come and gone. But still there is one left who let loose in the world the greatest force that ever lifted the human race--a vicarious self sacrifice backed by a faith, a character, a loyalty that was not defeated.

"If it be possible,....nevertheless...."

Amen