

Sermon Title: *You are here, I am here*: Praying in pain, anger, and for our enemies.

Matthew 26:36-44

<sup>36</sup> 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.’ <sup>37</sup>He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. <sup>38</sup>Then he said to them, ‘I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.’ <sup>39</sup>And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, ‘**My Lord, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.**’ <sup>40</sup>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?’ <sup>41</sup>Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.’ <sup>42</sup>Again he went away for the second time and prayed, ‘**My God, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.**’ <sup>43</sup>Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. <sup>44</sup>So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words.

Luke 18:9-14

<sup>9</sup> He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: <sup>10</sup>‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. <sup>12</sup>I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” <sup>13</sup>But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “**God, be merciful to me, a sinner!**” <sup>14</sup>I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’

For Reflection

Prayer might be described as a time in which we hope to connect with God...to come closer to God and to our true selves, to God within ourselves...to be aware of God’s presence and movement within ourselves and in our life experiences.

-Jean Gill

Marlene Kropf says that the most basic understanding of prayer this: *You are here, and I am here.* We are showing up, showing-up for relationship – this is our starting point and sometimes that is the best we can do – sometimes it is all we can do, to just show-up to the relationship: *God, you are here, and I am here.* There is not too much pressure to this, and still the act of showing-up can be hard.

I appreciate the simplicity and the honesty of this idea, to show-up for relationship, or for the hope of relationship. To show-up to God, to show-up to ourselves. To seek to be present to our true selves by tuning out the noise and clutter and distractions of life. *God, you are here, and I am here.*

These two passages that we heard this morning, they are amazing examples of praying honestly – of showing up authentically in prayer. These are not prayers of piety, of seeking to pray correctly according to some formula – they are not trying to pray as they think they should – these are the heartfelt and honest prayers of those in desperation:

The prayer of a tax-collector who can only say, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” These are his words, we might say his prayer is, *“God, you are here; and in my guilt, I am here.”*

And the story of Jesus praying in the Garden – a prayer of anguish, of grief, of fear of what Jesus sees his coming his way. And in that vast range of emotions he seeks God in prayer, asking for what he wants: “My God, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” To which he adds, “yet not what I want, but what you want.” And so we have a Messiah who approaches God honestly in prayer, “God I do not want to be arrested, I do not want to be tortured, I do not want

to be executed – let it pass by me, let me live a long and happy life, let me continue to this work that you have set before me.”

What a gift this brief passage is to us, an example that Jesus is not a robot – not a Messiah machine who just did all that was required of him without struggle or doubt or uncertainty or fear. We might say that his prayer in the Garden was, *God, you here, and in my anguish and fear, I am here.*

And so as we continue to consider Prayer and Spiritual Practices for a few more weeks, the questions we turn to this morning are: how do we pray in our pain, in our grief, in our anger and fear? And I thought I might discover some profound answers to these questions as I read and researched these questions, but all I have for us this morning was a simple answer – honesty. The way to pray in our pain, our grief, our fear, and our anger is to do so honestly. To show-up honestly to God and to yourself, to show-up honestly with your emotions: “God you are here, and I am here in my pain.” Or “God, you are here, and I am here furious at you God.”

And so this is the best I can do for us, to urge that we pray honestly. And while it seems like an easy prescription, it seems that sometimes the easiest prescriptions can be the hardest to live into: like changing what we eat or reducing stress – easy to prescribe but much harder to fulfill than taking a pill.

It is hard to show-up honestly to God in prayer with our full range of emotion (with what we are actually feeling) because it necessitates that we first must be honest with ourselves – we must first acknowledge those emotions and give them space. We must be honest with our own pain – we must acknowledge our own pain or disillusionment or fear or grief. It is much easier

to bury those feelings, to push them down, to ignore them or pretend they are not there. We of course cannot bring our honest feelings into the presence of God if we are not willing to acknowledge or examine them ourselves. Most of us are good at distractions and avoidance when it comes to such fear or grief.

For example, just this week I learned that John, a kid that I had mentored for two years, committed suicide. Hearing this news, feelings of sorrow and pain and guilt began to flood in – especially guilt: thinking about how little contact I had with him since I was in that mentor role; of how I could have done better or more; of the pain for his family that has already had so much pain. But I did not allow these feelings much space – I got back to work, I went and back to Corpus; when I got home I turned on my new Hulu show. And when Jenna asked me about it late that night I said curtly, “I am ready for bed.”

All that to say, it is not so easy to be honest with such things – I did not give these feelings much space, and I certainly did not take them to God. We are good at distractions. *God, you are here, but I am not here.*

The Bible offers us help on this front, it offers us a recommendation of how to bring our feelings honestly before God – it is called **lament**. A lament is an expression of our grief to the God that has called us into relationship – a passionate expression of grief, often expressed in music, poetry, song, or other art form – an expression of our grief that most often comes from regret or mourning or anger. Lament is not something we practice often in the Christian church, at least not in communal ways, but it was a foundational part of the Israelites’ relationship with God.

About three years ago we were having a community service of Lament after the Idaho

Legislative session, and in our planning meeting I asked Rabbi Dan Fink if he could offer a brief explanation on lament. He laughed for a moment at this question, and then said, “Oh yes, we know lament.” One-third of the Psalms are prayers of lament to God. When Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!” He was quoting one of these Psalms of lament. There is even a whole book of lament in the Old Testament called *Lamentations*, a book that is the expression of grief over the loss of Jerusalem (the greatest national tragedy ever experienced by the people of Israel). We have much to learn about lament from our Jewish neighbors and from the writings of the Old Testament.

The prayer of the tax collector, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” This is a prayer of lament, an expression of his honest feelings of regret. And Jesus’ prayer in the Garden, “if it is possible, let this cup pass from me,” this is a prayer of lament – an expression of honest fear and grief over what is unfolding. In lament we say, “*you are here, and in my pain and confusion, I am here.*”

But we often by-pass lament. Both in our personal pain and in our communal or national pain – we usually skip right lament and go directly to a response: to an answer without naming the pain, to a cliché without tears, to outrage without self-examination.

We avoid lament and honesty with God through false reassurance.

When a personal tragedy strikes someone close to us, we often say things like “God is in control”, or “they are in a better place”, or “everything happens for a reason”, or “everything will be alright.” In our discomfort we want to move people through lament into meaning and interpretation. We want to shield ourselves from the pain and grief. We want to explain why.

Even if we could know “why”, we still have to move through the pain of loss. We have to start with lament, with crying out to God, with saying “things are not as they should be, God!” Or “I am angry God” or “where are you God?” Perhaps, in these moments it will feel like prayer is, *“I am here God, but where are you?!”*

We avoid lament and honesty with God by avoiding honesty with one another.

This is one of the problems with how we have traditionally done church in our culture – we come to church dressed in our ‘Sunday best’ (or, in our case, our jeans without holes in them) – we come putting on the face that everything is alright. We feel a communal pressure to come to worship and act as if we have it all together, perhaps a bit like the Pharisee in our Luke passage, who articulates how well it is all going for him. *God you are here, but I am not really here – not truly here.*

And we avoid lament and honesty with God by jumping to action.

Nationally, when a tragedy strikes: when Elementary children are murdered in Sandy Hook, or nine black people are slain at a prayer meeting by a young white supremacist, or when another Black Life is taken by a police officer whose instincts have been formed through centuries of conscious and unconscious racism: our response is usually the same, we either jump right into the cries of calling for more gun restrictions, or to the other side, saying we need a gun in every classroom. We say we must have more thorough background checks, or we say put a gun in each church. We seek to defend the actions of the officer, or we seek revenge. We must first start with honest grief. With honest mourning. We must start with lament – of expressing ourselves to God

– of seeking the wisdom and guidance of God’s spirit. Of seeking God in the Garden, of seeking to – through prayer and reflection and honesty – align ourselves with the will of God in this particular moment; situation; event; tragedy.

Walter Brueggeman, professor of Old Testament at Columbia University, says that our national failing after September 11 was that we did not lament. We did not take time to nationally lament and grieve together. We instead said, “Go shopping – keep doing what you are doing – don’t let the terrorists win.” We put flags outside our homes and jumped into interpretation, “they hate our freedom.” And we rushed into a war that was, at least in part, a war of vengeance. We never took the time to lament our great national tragedy. We did what governments do, we sought to explain and respond swiftly. How different might our world look today if, on September 12 we would have collectively said, “Let us cry together, let us mourn together, let us seek God together.” Instead, we sought revenge together.

Amidst our pain and fear, if there is something to be learned, something to be discovered, or some guidance from God – we are likely to miss it when we rush straight into unexamined action – when we do not honestly bring our feelings to God and ourselves.

I saw this in myself a few weeks ago when we were touring the US/Mexico border. We were learning about such complex things, we were hearing a variety of stories, we were learning of tragedy and death in the desert and huge economic injustice. And the urge is to rush to thinking, “what can I do about this? Or how will I talk about this?” But this way of thinking, it skips the honesty of wrestling and my deeper feelings: the feelings of shock over policies of my Government, the feelings of anger at companies who pay such low wages, the feelings of guilt

that I make more in twelve minutes of work than Alejandro made in 12 hours working in the fields of southern Mexico. The urge is to bury those feelings of great discomfort and move into action. Action that helps those feelings to be avoided and diminished. *“God, you are here, but I am already out there.”*

Our God is not a transactional God, but a God of relationship. We do not have a God who is an ATM machine, handing out blessings for those who know the right PIN number, rather we have a God who invites us into honest engagement. In this country, our Christian faith is still so often quite caught-up and confused with this view of a transactional God – this has been so much of how we have told the American Christian story: if we give, we will get; if we follow all the right ways, all will go well for us; if we pray in the right ways, God will answer.

But there is no magic formula. There is not perfect living that will mean God will answer. No matter what you hear from preachers on TV or the radio, giving money is no guarantee that God will bless you with more money down the road. In the mystery of God, we are invited to walk with the God of relationship – the God who wants to hear the longings of our hearts; the God who wants us to share our anger and pain; who wants us to share our fears. The God who invites us to show-up, to connect.

*“God, you are here, I am here.”*

*You are here. We are here.*

*Help us to be present, O God. Help us to show-up, O God. Help us to be honest, O God, to you,*

*to ourselves, to one another.*

*You are here. We are here.*