

Fully Human Jesus
Rev. Rachel Callender
Mark 14:32-42
Sunday, 13th of September 2020
Medford UMC

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION

God, source of all light, by your Word, you give light to the soul. Pour out on us the spirit of wisdom and understanding, that our hearts and minds may be opened to know your truth and your way. Amen.

SERMON MANUSCRIPT

When's the last time you cut yourself some slack? Before the pandemic hit, we already were being consumed by a culture that encourages, if not requires proficiency and is slow to offer some grace or forgiveness. Then this pandemic hits: all of the sudden we have to completely reinvent the way we do our job - or even find a whole new job, it has turned full-time workers also into full-time teachers assistants while schooling at home, and it has taken away many of the vacations and activities to be excited about - YET - we still may be expecting the same high level of proficiency in ourselves that we were before. That equation doesn't quite seem to add up.

In the 1980's, sociologist Inge Bell encouraged an exercise based off of Tibetan meditations. Her instructions were as follows:

For twenty minutes walk around your room as slowly as you possibly can without losing your balance. It may take you ten minutes to cross the room. Just concentrate on the body-feeling of walking slowly. Don't do anything special with your mind—let it relax and go along for the ride. Now, for the rest of the day, do all your accustomed tasks at about 50% of your normal speed—even less when it seems possible. Walk to class slowly, take notes slowly, eat your lunch slowly, do your assignments slowly, go out on your date slowly.

After instructing some of her students to do this, they returned to her awestruck by the results it yielded. They not only found that they actually enjoyed it despite it sounding frustrating, they actually all reported being able to get more done. They were more productive doing things more slowly, more carefully, with more of themselves and their

bodies in mind. She connects this to how when runner's are told to run at 80% capacity, they get better times than if they run as fast as they can. You don't get burnt out or fatigued as easily. There's more listening to what your mind and body need.

I've experienced this in my own life. A few times, I've gone on a short spiritual retreat to Holy Cross Monastery in West Park, New York. It's an Episcopalian, Benedictine Men's Monastery that has a large focus on hospitality. When you go there, you meet for prayer in their chapel 4 to 5 times a day, people are doing puzzles in the common rooms, everything smells like incense, you stay in modest living quarters. It's slow, it's all done in Gregorian Chants, there's eucharist once a week.

The first time I went I had very little idea of what to expect, I was mid-semester during seminary so I was looking at a large, stressful week of midterms ahead and at first, I really regretted my decision to make the trek out there. I'd be going to all these prayers, all the meals are eaten in community so I wouldn't be able to be writing papers and studying flashcards while snarfing down dinner. I really thought I'd done myself a disservice by taking this retreat, but let me tell you: I've never written papers so quickly and efficiently in my life, I'd never felt so prepared for exams, I think it was my only time during seminary to get full nights of sleep!

By slowing down, by taking the time to check how I was doing, what my mind and body and spirit needed, by taking time aside to include God even more into my daily life, I was far more productive and I was far more happy in my work. I'm just chomping at the bit to be able to go visit there again!

This very much connects from last week's focus on sabbath and we transition that into this series on forgiving ourselves. And this sounds nice, right, "forgive ourselves!" but it's so essential for our spiritual growth. We spend a lot of time learning to forgive others, which is difficult enough to do on its own, but if we aren't also offering ourselves that same grace that we learn to offer other, then we've completely missed the mark.

Speaking of Mark, today's text about Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane comes from Mark's gospel but is a story we see told in some fashion by all 4 Gospel writers. John's is a little tougher to identify, Luke talks about it for about .5 seconds, Matthew has a lot more focus on Peter. Despite these differences, a theme seen throughout is Christ's anguish - His true, very real, very human, very unapologetic fear for what is to come. He doesn't want to do it! He's given everything He's got and desperately doesn't want to go through the suffering and sacrifice that He's see's ahead.

I said in Friday's mailing that I wouldn't sing any "Jesus Christ Superstar" so I will restrain myself BUT I will quote a little! In Jesus's beautiful song He sing's in the garden of Gethsemane, He refers to the 3 years of ministry He's been doing leading up to this moment. He begins, in a rather exhausted and exasperated way saying that those 3 years have felt like 30, and that number later increases to the 3 years feeling like 90. And yes, I understand that this is just an artist's musical rendition of this biblical moment, but it exemplifies the real despair and heartache we read in today's text.

Gethsemane, this location where Jesus goes to pray, actually means "oil press". At that time, an oil press was a device where a wooden wheel turned within another wooden wheel crushing olives to push liquid into a trough. Immense pressure was placed on the olive in order to yield results. It seems rather fitting that Jesus chose this spot to reveal His heart to God. He was under immense pressure and was having trouble managing the unease that came with that. In Luke, it even says that "His sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground." Many scholars explain this moment as something of a panic attack. Yes, Jesus having a panic attack.

In today's text, there are many very human yet very different actions happening all at one time. We have Jesus experiencing real anxiety and fear. "I'm very sad. It's as if I'm dying..." He says. Even in His being fully divine, even in His absolute, unwavering faith and knowledge of redemption and resurrection; He still is in despair, He still begs for His suffering to be over, He still pours out His fears in prayer.

The first thing we need to realize is that being scared is so human and doesn't mean that we don't have enough faith in God. If a loved one gets bad news from a doctor, is awaiting more test results and tells you that they're frightened, would you not empathize with that fear? Would you not see how that can be a terrifying position to be in and try to comfort them in that anxiety? Of course you would! So why, when it comes to ourselves, we're all the sudden, "Well, I'm not weak. I'm stronger than that. The bible tells me to never fear so I can't fear." No. Jesus is terrified. Do you forgive *Jesus* for being scared in that moment? Why not yourself?

On Christmas morning and Good Friday, we celebrate Christ being fully human but then the rest of the time, we seem to disregard that and only focus on His being fully divine. Healings, miracles, wisdom. Here, in His life, we see Him very human, very vulnerable, very scared. Jesus doesn't walk into this prayer resigned, He wants His fear known.

But we also see Peter, James, and John, the first three disciples that Jesus calls also falling folly to human error. They saw Him raise Jairus's 12 year old daughter from the dead, they were at the transfiguration up on the mountain being surrounded by light and flanked by Moses and Elijah, they believe in Christ - The Son of God. Yet, they were asked to stay awake to keep watch and instead fell asleep. They are often criticized by modern readers, mocked even for not being able to stay awake to keep watch while Christ pours out His agony in prayer, and yes of course, it's like, "You're friend is clearly not okay and you can't focus for 60 minutes?" BUT they are taking another approach to anxiety and suffering. They're sleeping, finding that the world is overwhelming and chaotic and that sometimes it's easier to be criticized for sleeping than to deal with the real tragedy that's occurring. That's also a very real coping mechanism that happens.

I find this to be very true in my own life. There are times when too much is happening and there's too many things to be worried about and I start to get a headache. For the longest time, I tried to just power through those moments, "No, no, I can handle this. Let's get some caffeine!" But I've come to realize that I'm really not that helpful like

that. So sometimes, if its all too much, I'll just take a nap, remove myself from it all for a short period, and then I find I'm much more productive. In that, I need to remember that I'm only human, forgive myself for not being able to do everything all the time.

They say that pastors should write sermons for themselves, not their congregations. So, I guess I wrote this sermon for myself.

In many ways, this text is a cry for self-care and awareness of our own mental wellbeing. In this global fight to maintain physical health, the already very pressing need for expansion and access to mental and behavioral health sources has increased exponentially.

Let me share with you some alarming statistics:

According to the National Health Council, since mid-February, there have been more than **88,000** additional positive depression and anxiety screening results in the US over what had been expected using the previous year's data.

In the month of April, depression screenings increased by **394%** and as of May, anxiety screenings have increased by **370%** over that of January per day.

In **1 out of 4** of those screenings, the themes of grief, loss, and financial issues were mentioned.

Those with chronic health conditions that leave them more vulnerable to COVID are in the **75-80%** range for depression and anxiety.

Younger populations are actually being hit particularly hard by anxiety and depression. In May, these populations were experiencing higher rates of anxiety and depression than any other age group with anxiety rates around **80%** and depression rates around **90%** of the youth and young adults being screened.

National depression rates for young people of 90%. Having mental health challenges, particularly when under immense strain is just part of being human. We shouldn't need to forgive ourselves for acknowledging our humanity and asking for help, but if offering yourself some forgiveness is what you need to do to get that help, then do that. Forgive yourself for not being super mom, or for aiming for grades in school that would just

get you the degree or for putting away that constantly beeping phone in the sock draw for an hour.

Many years ago, I jotted down a line from one of my father's sermons where he said, "Forgiveness alone decides whether or not that failure, that evil, that wrong is final and life-defining; or whether there is life beyond it." And I always thought of this in terms of forgiving someone else. My authentic, true, deep in my core forgiveness for someone else, free's me from any resentment or trying to prove myself or any hold that that may have on me - yeah that's true.

But I've come to realize though that that forgiveness also needs to be extended to myself. I will not get to the life beyond the failures or mistakes I've made unless I forgive myself for it; unless I let myself off the hook for not being perfect. Unless I can say, "Yeah, maybe in hindsight I could've tried harder or done this or that, but I made the best choice I could in that moment. I really did try."

Why have we convinced ourselves that we have to be super-human? God, Jesus, gets emotional, needs to talk about what's going on in the world, needs to express feelings. They say the best counselors, see a counselor. It's kind of why I often get a little shaken when people say things like, "The God of the Old Testament is too wrathful, I prefer the God of the New Testament." First of all, same God. Second, and I think this is really important, God is emotional. God does experience anger and sadness and loss. It's all over scripture. These traits, these feelings we experience, for the good and the bad, are God given. I'm glad that God gets angry sometimes because I get angry sometimes! And sometimes I get angry for very legitimate reasons - I should be angry! God gets angry about the mistreatment of the poor, about injustice's, about the marginalized being treated harshly by those in power - so should we!

A friend of mine shared what can seem like a minor but yet very embarrassing moment he had but was met with grace that he then learned to offer to himself also. He writes:

"When I was in college, I was part of a men's bible study that met at Starbucks every Thursday... at 6am. I was the only college student, but really enjoyed the group despite feeling like an outsider at times due to

my age. I often felt insecure that I didn't get up until 8am on most days, so it was hard to make it across town by bike on crisp mornings by 6am.

One week it was my turn to lead bible study, and I was really grateful for the opportunity, particularly due to my age. I prepared, and met with the pastor to discuss. When my Thursday came, though, I almost had a panic attack at 7:30am. I had totally overslept and missed the whole meeting. I was embarrassed, ashamed, and scared to face my peers' and pastor's anger and disappointment. Yet, I was surprised to notice a graceful email informing me that someone else took charge of small group when it became apparent I wasn't showing up. I emailed the group that night to apologize and included the day's lesson plan. I was so encouraged by my pastor's quick, simple reply: 'Thanks for the note, We forgive you and extend grace to you. We all appreciate you, and thanks for sending the lesson...'

Such a short note but so full of grace. It's stuck with me ever since: I merited criticism but received forgiveness instead. I was and still am only human."

I really look forward to further exploring forgiveness for the next few weeks. Sometimes when I step back and think about forgiveness, I get sort of breathless by the fact that forgiveness, whether for another or for yourself, is a very divine trait - I'm thankful that we have some capacity to offer it and experience it. We need more of it. Ultimately, it's God's forgiveness that enables us to forgive not only others, but ourselves.

We learn in Christ's own humanity more about our humanity: more about what it means to be a person who won't always get everything right, who will at times get overwhelmed or anxious. We see Christ exemplify the need for self-care, for a chance to slow down, for people to turn to when we need help, and for the necessity of prayer in our lives.

BENEDICTION (2 Thessalonians 1:11b-12 adapted)

May God make you worthy of your high calling;
May God fulfill in you every good resolve and work of faith,
so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you,
and you in God, according to the grace of God. Go in peace. Amen.