

Suffering Glib Neglect in Gethsemane
(Palm Sunday – April 5, 2009)

Matthew 26:36-46

Leaving the upper room where they had eaten together, Jesus and his disciples went to a place called Gethsemane. When they arrived he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He was much grieved and agitated. As it says, "...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."

When he returned to where the disciples were, he found them asleep. He said to them, "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. Upon his return he said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Get up. Let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

It had to have been with terrible self-reproach and chagrin that those disciples made themselves report to others this part of the Holy Week story, thereby allowing it to become part of our New Testament scripture.

Only realizing after the fact, how grave the situation was that night, and worse yet, realizing how profound must have been his agonizing over whether or not he should knowingly proceed on the course that would lead to his death, must have been unbearable to contemplate. Particularly though, their remembering what had been their glib, insensitive, cavalier yawning while he sweat blood, must have filled them with regrets unlike any they'd ever known.

And they'd recall too that this had only been the worst of what had been a whole week of their being agitated, distracted, preoccupied and feeling sorry for themselves. They had been

strongly opposed to coming to Jerusalem in the first place, so sympathy for Jesus' seeming so glum now that he was here, didn't come very naturally.

Earlier that night at dinner, it had bugged them when Jesus said something yet again to the effect that he would suffer and die here in Jerusalem. Starting weeks before, while they were still up in Galilee, he had said that repeatedly. They didn't want to hear it and wished he'd quit saying it. True, almost anything could happen in Jerusalem, but they'd been here now for four days without even a really close call.

What was badly needed here was some optimism, some positive thinking. And they, despite the blisters on their feet from walking the 40 miles down here, despite their lousy accommodations in this hot, noisy, overcrowded city, notwithstanding the fact that merchants were gouging the pilgrims here for Passover Week in what they charged for food, and in spite of the way they kept getting on each other's nerves, STILL they were trying to be civil, affable, and amicable. But the stress of it all did take a lot out of them.

Meanwhile, it didn't help at all that Jesus was more somber and stressed than they had ever seen him. They just want this trip to be over.

Even with all of that though, they were doing their very best to believe that, whatever it was that was preoccupying Jesus, he'd handle it. Hadn't he always done so? They kept telling themselves with tight-lipped determination that when the sun came up in the morning, he would be his own remarkable self again. All would be just fine and maybe ---just maybe --he'd be willing to head back to Galilee where they all belonged.

Comforted by concentrating on that nice thought, yes, they'd dozed off when they had a chance to stretch out in the Garden of Gethsemane. God knows, they needed the rest. True, they'd sensed some hurt in his voice when he came back to where they were a couple of times and found them all asleep. Even so, when he went back to pray some more, they dozed off again.

That's why the soldiers of the High Priest were able to walk right into the midst of them and arrest Jesus. Even as they began putting him in chains, it seemed crazy, like a bad dream. "Didn't these guys know that they couldn't arrest Jesus, that it would never stick, that people would rise up and riot in objection?" But they were doing it to him.

Peter did draw a sword and take a couple of futile swings with it, slightly injuring one arresting officer. Oddly enough though, Jesus told Peter to put his weapon away. Then the arresting officers marched off with Jesus. The disciples were left open-mouthed and paralyzed with shock.

Jesus, as now they realized, had gone through all of those agonizing days and climactic hours essentially alone, quite without the support and understanding of even those very closest of friends. It wasn't because they were hardhearted or unloving or dull people. No. It was because they thought he was making a mountain out of a molehill because of some sort of overblown imaginings that had triggered some sort of temporary mood swing in him. Especially with the difficulty that they were having, keeping their own thoughts optimistic and focused in a healthy way, it had seemed best, "Just to leave him to work it out on his own."

It very well could be that Jesus' emotional isolation, the lack of sensitivity, empathy and "real presence" of those he loved and who presumably loved him, may have been almost as painful as some of the physical abuse and torture that he was going to undergo the following day.

It's well worth reflecting upon though. That's because it does sound somewhat familiar, doesn't it? If I, for example, had been there as one of the disciples, had known Jesus to be so wonderfully stable, emotionally strong, a tower of faith, remarkably decisive, always hopeful, might not I have failed to take seriously the possibility that right now something profoundly different was going on in him or with him?

I suspect that this wasn't the last time that someone like him, because he was seen as being so indomitable, ended up a victim of glib neglect. And as must have later been the case with

the disciples, those who were closest end up scratching their heads and protesting, "She always seems so strong that I never doubted for a second that she would take this in stride too." "How could he have felt that alone and abandoned when there were so many of us around the whole time?" "Hey, one day I did my best to persuade him to lighten up but it just didn't happen so I figured he preferred to be left alone." "That sort of thing has never bothered me all that much so how would I have ever guessed what it was doing to her?" "I guess that I really thought you were imagining most of it. I had no idea how it was really affecting you."

As I think you can see, this isn't caused by character defects, by hard-heartedness, indifference, or emotional impairment. It's most often a problem of bad assumptions.

Sometimes when we don't take seriously the distress or despair of another it has to do, for example, with making false comparisons with our own past experiences. "I had some very rough days something just like him a couple of years ago," he tells himself, "but I simply told myself, 'Quit feeling sorry for yourself!' and I bounced right out of it. I'd have thought he would too."

That sounds logical enough but it's so often dead wrong. To assume that the effect of a hurt or disillusionment or grief or major scare should be ---would be ---about the same in another person as it was for you or me is not at all a safe assumption. No, not only is it a bad assumption, it's frequently no more than a rationalization for turning off one's concern.

Another atrocious assumption is the one with which the disciples were probably afflicted. With them it would have been the assumption that since Jesus was such a strong, insightful, deep-thinking and sensible person, any of his worries or morale problems must be very incidental. "People like him or her quickly and easily lift themselves out of melancholy or anxiety "by their own bootstraps." "They certainly don't need my puny, amateurish, clumsy attempts to be of comfort or support!"

Here again, that is an extraordinarily bad assumption. The chemistry of even wordless empathy and silent presence is powerful beyond anything that can be logically explained.

Something else that very frequently gets in the way is what may be yours or my fear or uneasiness in the face of another persons' pain. "What if I say exactly the wrong thing?" "What if I'm intruding?" "What if it ends up depressing me?" "What good will that do?" "Even if having someone with her would be good, how do I know that I'm not precisely the wrong one to be that person?" "Perhaps the timing will be better later on."

Here again, to go down that path in our thinking and questioning is to become completely paralyzed with misgivings and, of course, never arriving where needed.

The other barrier or problem is no more than garden-variety self-absorption --the insensitivity that always accompanies our self-absorption. It's when, far, far from empathy, the person responds with irritation to the fact that he or she is spoiling everything with his melancholy or anxiousness. "Whatever is his problem, he's going to have to deal with it alone because right now I've already got far more on my plate than I should have to handle." "Okay, yes, she's sad. That's too bad, but I'm not going to let it spoil MY day." "You know, I believe that he gets like this because he has some neurotic need to drag other's morales down to his level. The best thing to do with one like him is leave him alone and make him get over it."

Whatever allows it, this kind of interpersonal, human deprivation is tragic when it happens. One could hear incredulity even from Jesus that night when repeatedly he found the disciples sound asleep. And I'm certain that it wasn't that he wanted them hanging all over him, showering him with advice or glib assurances that everything was going to be just fine. In fact it says that he moved further on a few yards from where they were for some solitude. Even so, he was clearly shocked at their nonchalance in regard to what he was going through. (He seemed to be more surprised and bewildered at their sleeping in Gethsemane than he was at Peter's denial or Judas' betrayal.)

No (if that's what you're thinking) this is not the central point of the Holy Week events. But it IS obviously a memory that was so incredibly engraved in the consciences of the disciples

that they felt morally obligated to pass it on to us, despite how embarrassing to them the memory must have been.

Once again, it's not that you or I will always be able to take away another's pain or quiet his anxiety or solve her dilemma. But we can take it seriously even when we don't totally understand it. We can be quietly present to it even when there's nothing to be said. We can be something to him or her even though we may not be able to be everything we wish that we could.

Count on it: sometimes, without our saying a word or taking any kind of decisive action, in ways we were not able to see at the time, we end up being the very presence and touch of God in someone's Gethsemane, just by being awake, present, human and responsive to him or her.