

Words help us to form images. For example, what do you imagine when I say the word “garden”? Do you think of a particular garden or does a generic one come to mind? Now what if I change my question slightly and say rose garden? Do you form a different image or is your garden image the same as the first one you had? Moving on, what comes to your mind when I say “garden of Gethsemane”? John in his Gospel writes that after the upper room Jesus and his disciples went “to a place where there was a garden” (18:1 NIV). How do imagine that garden?

Now I did what most of us in this computer age who have not visited the Holy Land would do—got on line and googled "garden of Gethsemane." Immediately, or almost immediately, there were hundreds of pictures available for me to examine. Here were pictures of a garden filled mostly with olive trees – a quiet, solitary looking place. A place of serenity and peace. A place to be alone in prayer.

Jesus and the disciples have finished the Passover meal. They have celebrated again the ancient ritual of remembrance and hope. They have sung the ancient hymns, repeated the ancient words and eaten the foods associated with their redemption from Egypt. They have asked the Passover questions. They have also remembered the promise: a chair has been set for Elijah’s return. They know the promise that as God has redeemed in the past so will God again redeem. This is a night of remembrance, hope and expectation. As the meal finishes they move from the upper room to a garden, the garden of Gethsemane.

Now it has been a long day or two. It is now in the early morning hours. They have feasted on traditional food and wine. They are tired. Jesus leaves most of them in one part of the garden and takes three, Peter, James and John, a little further into the garden and asks them to pray with him. The anguish of the coming hours is heavy on his heart. However, like the others they, too, are tired. Their day, too, has been long, the spirit is willing but the flesh grows weaker and they, too, fall asleep.

Whenever I read this I remember a camping experience. I was co-director of a Junior High camp and we had had a long day. My co-director and I shared a room and usually had a time of prayer together before going to sleep. We offered thanks for the activities of the day, thanks that we had not lost any campers and sought guidance for the coming day. This night my co-director prayed first. Maybe he prayed a little longer than normal but the next thing I knew it was morning. I asked him if I had prayed. He said “no”. Maybe he had prayed a little too long because after he finished there was nothing but silence from my side of room! I know how the disciples felt.

Jesus prays as his disciples sleep. The Scriptures provide a strong image of the intensity of his prayer and these moments in his life. His anguish is his wanting to be alone and not wanting to be alone. We all have those moments. Those times when our soul is so anguished that we want to be alone with our thoughts but then we don’t want to be alone. We want someone there with us. The disciples understand, I think, but exhaustion sets in. Thus, here alone, Jesus lays his soul bare before God. Here Jesus prays honestly about his thoughts, his apprehension and anxiety over the coming hours.

I am not sure if we can ever comprehend the intenseness of this time in the garden. Here Jesus shows the depth of his love and concerns for us. The disciples sleep. They still don’t understand what is about to happen. He has told them plainly (Matthew 20:17-

19). At the most pivotal time in history they sleep. They haven't grasped much yet. It would be better if he had more time with them. It seems like they will never learn. Is there another way? If possible can this cup pass? Are there any other options?

This portion of Jesus' prayer is not an indication of a lack of faith but is an indication of the depth of his love for us. He is concerned about these followers. He wonders if they are ready for the task before them. His humanity becomes a part of the prayer. He is as we are, human.

I want to share what this prayer means to me this morning. In some ways, prayer could be defined as our thinking out loud before God. Our God desires that we be open and honest in our communication. This is the way I like to do things, the way I like to work with groups, with you. I prefer to "float" out an idea or two and see what comes back. I never expect it to be accepted exactly the way I desire. I want to know if it is a good idea, and if it is, how we can tweak it to make it a great idea. Or, is there another way we can accomplish the same goal? I hope my ideas will stimulate the visioning of others and that together we come up with new possibilities. I hope I am always open to fresh new ideas of how to do ministry, etc. We can even learn from our failures. This is how I believe God wants our relationship with God to be. Christ demonstrated this in his garden prayer. Is there another way?

It also means that we must be ready to accept God's way. Jesus prayed three times in the garden. Why? I am not sure. I don't see this as any magical number. I see Jesus' humanity coming through. If, as we are told, he experiences all the trials and temptations that we do then he understands our anxiety, our anxiousness when we stand at the edge of the unknown. He understands our reluctance and our question: Is there another way? It is a question he has already asked!

This is for me the ultimate prayer of faith. Now I know it goes against much of the popular Gospel of our day, the "name and claim it" Gospel. We are told that if we have faith we can claim anything and God will give it to us. If our prayers are not answered then we have a lack of faith. Just saying this means that Jesus had a lack of faith – he prayed that the cup would pass and it didn't. The faith of the garden prayer is in the words, "Not my will but yours be done." It is when we reach the point that we are willing to place our hands, our lives in another. It is in trusting a God who sees beyond today into an eternal tomorrow.

But this is not the end. There is one more step, a step that we often ignore. Jesus has prayed. He has opened his soul before God, been honest with his feelings and has come to the conclusion... "Get up, let us be going" (Matthew 26:46 NRSV). We can only pray for so long. After that we must get up and get going. Going in the assurance that God is leading and we are following. We cannot stay forever in the garden praying.

Maybe this is one of the problems with the church today. We as the people of God have become too comfortable in the garden. We feel safe and secure within these walls. We know, are known and are comfortable with our surroundings. We will pray about the situation. Then we will pray about it again. Then why not pray about it again, and maybe again. We pray while the fields are white for harvest. We pray while God is asking us to move from the safety and security of the garden into the place in the world where God is now actively working. Why should we leave the garden? Why? Because God so LOVES the world.