



GRAPPLING WITH GOD: JESUS

September 8, 2019, Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 22:39-46

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Picture a crowded cocktail party, two vague acquaintances find themselves face to face. “Hi, how are you?” “Fine, how are you doing?” “Great, a little tired, but aren’t we all?” “Too much work, right?” “Yeah, too much work.”

At this point in the interaction the two people furtively look around for an excuse to join another conversation that might actually be going somewhere.

Unfortunately they are wedged in a corner with no obvious means of escape.

“Wow, this weather, huh?” “Yeah, this weather.”

We have all experienced this awkward moment when we find ourselves stuck in a conversation half an inch deep and leading nowhere. We have no history with the person in front of us. We have never spoken that much. We have never discussed anything essential about ourselves with them. There may be significant things going on in our lives, but how would we begin to share them with this person who knows so little of who we are?

Picture a different scene; it is the end of a long day. You are weary and walking home from the subway. Your head is down and you are lost in your own thoughts. You nearly bump into someone on the sidewalk and you look up to see it is one of your oldest and dearest friends. You met in college and have shared many ups and downs over the years. This person was there for you when you got your first promotion and the first time you were fired. They were there through the birth of your children and that rough patch in your marriage. They know who you are because you have shared much of your journey with them. There have been so many important conversations over the years. They smile and say, “Hey, Great to see you.” “Yeah great to see you.” “How are things?” “Fine, just fine.”



But they look into your eyes and can tell that is not true. They say, “So tell me what is really going on.” Before you know it you are pouring out your heart to them. You are telling them about a health scare your husband is having, and how much you are worried where your son will go to school next year, and every burden that has been weighing you down. As the words tumble out of you, you are experiencing a flood of relief. Nothing has been solved, but sharing what you have been carrying is deeply comforting for some reason.

Every conversation in which we engage is fundamentally shaped by its context. Conversations that occur as part of an ongoing deep and abiding relationship of communication can be transformative. A single verbal interaction with a stranger rarely allows for the sort of connection and honesty and compassion that can feed us the most, particularly in times of crisis.

And the very same thing is true for our prayer life. There is the old adage that there are no atheists in foxholes. In other words, in the midst of crisis most of us are likely to lift up an urgent plea to the divine. Now I deeply trust that God hears each and every prayer that is prayed. But when we only pray in those rare moments of crisis, we lack the foundation that is built when we incorporate prayer into our daily lives. However, when all of our life is offered up to God, we are invited into intimate relationship with the one to whom we are praying.

Years ago Malcolm Gladwell famously announced that it took 10,000 hours to become an expert at something. This led to a flurry of folks mapping out for their children how many hours a day they needed to practice the cello so they could one day perform with the New York Philharmonic. Later on, Gladwell’s neat little theory was debunked, but what is clearly true is that the more we intentionally engage in a practice the better chance we have at becoming adept at it.

In other words, the more we pray, the more likely we can experience prayer as a meaningful and life-changing experience. The gospel of Luke makes this abundantly clear. The preacher Fred Craddock notes that “Jesus is presented by



Luke as a man of prayer...As one who prayed regularly, sometimes all night, and especially at significant times in his life..."¹

His continuing conversation in prayer with God the Creator informed and shaped his entire life. When Jesus is baptized he prays to God and we are told "the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."

Jesus is then led into the wilderness where he is faced with temptations. One of the most compelling is the challenge to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple to prove what it says in scripture about the messiah. "He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you," and "On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." In my mind this may be the greatest of the temptations. The wonderfully comforting but illusory thought that our God will protect us from every harm that is possible in this life; that somehow our faith can be worn as an amulet around our neck protecting us from everything.

But as Jesus faces this all too intriguing temptation he is not empty-handed. During his prayers to God at his baptism, Jesus was told that he is the beloved Son. Armed with this knowledge; assured of how deeply he is cared for; confident of how precious he is in God's eyes; he does not equate ease of life with divine favor. Jesus can rebut the temptation, saying, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."

Each and every moment of our life comes with a context. As we go through our days we carry with us the sum of our experience; the choices we have made; the relationships we have had; the lessons we have learned; the ways we have been wounded, the ways we have been healed. We carry all of it along with us. When Jesus faced that momentous night and the world and his enemies were closing in around him I would not dare to speculate about how overwhelming that all must have felt. But we do know when he knelt down all by himself to come to grips with all that lay before him he had a familiar, no, more than familiar, an intimate direction in which to turn.



He was not starting a conversation with God the Creator. Jesus was continuing a life-long conversation. All of those previous prayers allowed him to approach God with the absolute honesty that can only exist between those who know and understand each other as completely as possible. Jesus can make the urgent plea, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me;” Without equivocation he can seek to persuade God to push aside all that is to come. A lifetime of prayer has created a context where he can reveal his every doubt and fear, his every misgiving and weakness. He can even challenge God to change what has been set before him.

And a lifetime of prayer has also given him the strength to offer a second kind of prayer, “yet, not my will, but yours be done.” Those prayers all those years ago at his baptism and throughout his life had revealed how deeply God loves him. They gave him the strength at that time to reject the temptation that he could be shielded from all harm. And now Jesus faces the ultimate fruition of that challenge. As he faces his own death, rapidly approaching, he somehow has the ability to bow down before the will of God even in this most extreme moment.

There are times when we minimize what this must have been for Jesus; after all, he is Jesus, right? But he was not floating on some heavenly cloud during his earthly life. He was mortal and vulnerable and as capable of feeling alone and terrified as any of us. This was no academic exercise for Jesus. We are told, “In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.” He had as much fear of being crucified as any of us would. But he also had someone to whom he could turn in the midst of his crisis.

Now, of course, we are not Jesus. No one is coming to crucify us. But we too have crises. We too have moments when we are flooded with fear and feel all alone. When a marriage begins to disintegrate. When a medical test comes back with more questions than answers. When we have no idea what is to come next in our lives. And so, to whom do we turn when it all just goes to hell? If we are lucky we have a deep and abiding friendship, we have someone who truly knows all of who we are and still loves us, warts and all. And we can look that person in



the eye and fall apart in front of them and know that no matter what, we are loved. Well, that friendship did not happen overnight. All of that intimacy and trust was built over countless conversations and times spent together.

We have that same opportunity with our God. If prayer is not a priority in our life; if it is something we do rarely and by rote; if we do not pour ourselves into it over the years; when a crisis does arrive we can find ourselves turning to God and feeling as if we are trapped with a vague acquaintance at a cocktail party. And that is no place to be in a crisis. But if we pray to God on the good days and the bad days, the extraordinary days and the mundane days; if we offer up all of who we are to God on a regular basis we can dare to approach God with confidence and intimacy. We may not be guaranteed a life of ease but we can learn how deeply God does indeed cherish us. We can find ourselves before a trusted friend who knows all of who we are and still loves us.

“Wow, this weather, huh?” Or, “Tell me what is really going on.” The choice is ours.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Craddock, Fred B., *Luke*, Interpretation series, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1990, pp. 261-262.