

Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, April 9, 2017

LOVING, FAITHFUL OBEDIENCE

Mark 14:32-42

On the hill outside Jerusalem called the Mount of Olives, there's a path called the Palm Sunday road. It leads from the small town of Bethany around the mount and past the biggest Jewish cemetery in the world. From there it heads to the foot of the hill, and then runs across a valley called Kidron which is no more than a third of a mile across. On the other side of the valley stands the ancient wall which surrounded the Old City of Jerusalem, protecting it against invaders. And in the middle of the wall, as you stand gazing at it across the valley, is a gate, walled up in the 12th century by Moslem conquerors, a gate called Golden. It was on this road almost 2000 years ago that our Lord Jesus Christ rode a donkey down the hill of Olivet, across the Kidron Valley, and entered triumphantly into the City of David to begin the last week of His life.

That day was a glorious day, from the perspective of His followers, who saw the adulation of the crowds, the way they strewed palm branches at the feet of their Master, and heard the shouts of "Hosanna to the king! Hosanna to the Son of David!" They must have thought the world lay at their very feet, ripe for the taking.

But such was not to be the case. As the week wore on, the Romans, whom they no doubt expected to flee at the sight of One so blessed by Israel's God, remained as unshakable, oppressive, and invincible as ever. The bigger disappointment was probably at the reaction of the Sanhedrin, and its factions of Pharisees and Sadducees, who far from greeting Jesus as a conquering hero, treated Him instead as an enemy.

To the Pharisees, He was an interloper, a nobody without formal theological or legal training. He spoke of God as His Father rather than with the required reserve. He dared to overturn centuries-old interpretations of the Law as if they were nothing. He opposed a religion of externals with a religion of the heart, a religion of ritual with a religion of relationship, a religion of law with a religion of grace. He agreed with the Pharisees about a great many things, but was different enough to make them feel as though He threatened their entire approach to Judaism.

The Sadducees, on the other hand, immediately recognized Him as one who would oppose their lifeless, politically opportunistic kind of religiosity with every fiber of His being. They wanted the Romans out of Israel as much as the next Jew, but as long as they were a fact of life, the Sadducees were going to cooperate with them as much as possible, and Jesus threatened to upset that apple cart with His uncompromising preaching and teaching. So as the week wore on, it became clear that the leadership stood against Jesus, and hence against His followers.

Worse yet, the people seemed to turn against them as well. In accordance with what they had heard all their lives about the coming of the Messiah, the people expected the successful revolt against Rome to begin as soon as the Son of David came into the city. But nothing happened. Instead, He went every day to the Temple to teach. He routed the money changers out of the Temple courtyards, and seemed far more interested in religious reform than political revolt. So as the leadership played on their fears and let-down hopes, the people began to drift away, to lose interest, and would soon be transformed into a mob calling for His execution.

As they came to Thursday of that week, it was time to come together to eat the Passover Seder, in remembrance of God's mighty work in freeing Israel from the slavery of Egypt. Jesus promised them that a far greater deliverance was at hand, that soon death would be overthrown and sin deprived of its power over humanity. But that moment had not yet arrived. Before it could, our Lord would have to go through a hell difficult if not impossible for most of us to imagine.

After the Passover Seder meal, during which the sacrament of Holy Communion was instituted, Jesus went with 12 disciples out from Jerusalem, and went to an olive grove that lay nestled at the foot of the Mount of Olives, a remnant of which survived (or was allowed to survive) the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, eight trees that continue to thrive as testimonies to the events that happened there. The peaceful place was alongside the path He had trod in entering the city the previous Sunday, and it was called Gethsemane, meaning "oil press," because here olive oil was extracted from the fruit of the trees by means of a press. Jesus left most of them outside the walls of the garden, and brought with Him Peter, James, and John, and asked them to keep watch while He prayed.

He posted them to guard the place while He prayed, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow, even to the point of death." And why not? He knew exactly what He faced in the hours to come. Trial, rejection, humiliation, torture, crucifixion – these were in our Lord's immediate future. His sorrow was the expression of His humanity. No human being who is in his or her right mind actively seeks out pain or death. We may welcome our death under awful circumstances, we may accept suffering as our lot in life, but we would rarely if ever consider these to be positive goods. At best they are ways out of worse situations, such as when the pain of enduring a horrible illness causes some to want to die. For our Lord to be sorrowful at the events to come is perfectly natural, not in any way sinful, and proof again of His humanity, of His ability to empathize with and understand all that we go through in this life.

Having spoken these words to His disciples, "going a little farther" (Luke says a "stone's throw away") He fell on His knees before His Father in heaven and prayed, pouring His heart out before the One who had sent Him into the world with the mission that included suffering, pain, and death. In a passage that has puzzled many through the centuries, He said, "*Abba*, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me."

Why, Christians have wondered, why would He ask for the cup, which stands for His own death on the cross, why would He ask for the cup to pass from Him if He knew that He would have to go through with the crucifixion if He were to complete His mission? Why would He ask, “If it is possible?” knowing that it wasn’t? Once again, this is an expression of His humanity. Even as we ask God to be spared the harsh realities of life, so too our Lord in His humanity wished to be spared the agonies He was about to face.

You and I speak to God on two different levels all the time. I know when I go to the hospital, and I pray over a brother or sister whom the doctors have pronounced terminally ill, I pray differently than I do over someone who has been given hope of survival. With the terminal patient, I pray both for healing and for comfort, and I ask for healing in spirit, if not in body. This is quite deliberate. I know that God can do miracles, and enable those whom doctors think will die to live. I also know that more often than not, when conditions reach that point, God is not going to intervene to change the natural processes, and that people need to be ready should death come. I pray that way because I believe that either result is possible, depending upon the Lord’s will in the given situation. When Jesus prayed in the garden, it was a bit different, in that being the Son of God He knew what the outcome would be. But His humanity, His link with us, God’s means of identifying with us, expressed itself in the hope against hope that death would be postponed.

Here’s another way of thinking about it: in that situation, we would have done exactly the same thing. None of us, being able to read the signs of the times, as it were, in the events of the past week, none of us would have stood before God and said: “Come get me, Father. I’m ready. I can’t wait to just climb up that old cross and die for the sins of the world. Let the Romans beat me, let the crowds spit on me, let the guards pound the nails into my hands. I’m looking forward to it.” None of us would have prayed that way, right? We would have asked God, “Is there any other way, Father? If there is, please let this terrible death pass me by.” When Jesus prayed that way, He was praying as we would have, as any human being would have. He was not just divine, He was human, too, and never has any human faced death in the way that He faced it.

You’ll notice, of course, that Jesus’ prayer didn’t end with “take this cup from Me.” Instead, it ended, “Yet not what I will, but what You will.” This is the key to understanding what happened that night in the olive grove, because while it is true that the Lord asked that the cup be taken from Him, it is also true that He accepted it with a full and free heart. What Jesus does here is of incalculable worth to us, as He shows us what the essence of the Christian life is. It has two elements: one is that it consists of the obedience which stems from faith; the other is that this obedience is freely given. Let’s take a look at these two elements in a little depth.

First, remember what faith is. It is the substance of our relationship with God, a trust in His purposes for us, a willingness to rest in His grace, a love for Him that makes us throw ourselves into His arms, to give ourselves wholly to Him. It has to do with the way that we relate to Him, rather than being a matter of believing something we can’t

prove. As a human being, and one who knew God in a way we can only hope to approximate, Jesus had that kind of relational faith in His Father in heaven, the difference between Him and us being that His faith was perfect, never wavering, never holding back anything. That faith resulted in perfect obedience at every moment of His life, so that the writer to the Hebrews can say that He was in all things tempted as we are, yet was without sin. That is to say, His relationship with His Father was never broken in any way. When He prayed in the garden, “not what I will, but what You will,” He was expressing this perfect faith in the form of a perfect obedience willing to give everything He had, including His life, if that was what the Father required of Him. In the same way, as you and I express our faith in the Lord, we do so through obedience to His commands, not because of any legal obligation or even sense of duty, but because we love Him and want to serve Him, just as a husband wants to serve his wife as a way of expressing his love for her.

The second element in our Lord’s prayer is that it was freely given. When He prayed, “as You will,” He didn’t say it like, “ok, if that’s what you want, I’m not happy about it, but I guess I have to go along, but you’ll be sorry if this doesn’t turn out right, you should have listened to me and given me what I asked for.” There’s no whininess in this prayer, only the desire to serve His Father in just the way that’s been asked of Him. We have been given the same opportunity, to freely give of ourselves or not. When we contemplate our day-to-day relationship with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, it’s important to recognize a couple of things. One is that we’re not talking about salvation and election here, both of which are about God’s sovereign and eternal choice, but sanctification and holiness, which are a process in which we participate freely empowered by the Spirit of God in a way we could never have participated in our salvation by “making a decision for Christ” or whatever. The second is again that we’re not talking about abstract philosophy or legal obligation here, obedience in the context of a loving relationship in which it is our heart’s desire to obey our Father just as a son desires to obey his human father out of love for him. Of course, the fact that we are participants in this process means that sin can and does sometimes flourish in our lives, but there’s a far more important benefit to our having been free participants in the sanctification process: it means that our love is genuine, and that our obedience is done as a result of that love, rather than out of grudging duty to the law or from fear of punishment.

Our Lord rode into Jerusalem on Sunday of the last week of His life acclaimed as a King, as Israel’s Savior. He endured a week of growing opposition, of rejection, and humiliation. He ended that week as a criminal dying the worst sort of death. Yet never did He waver in His resolve to do His Father’s will; never did He refuse Him the obedience that was rightly His; never did He stop trusting His Father and His purposes; never did He question His Father’s wisdom, or the rightness of His mission. At every moment, He freely gave to His Father exactly what was needed from Him, and in the end He paid the price. Not for His freely given obedience, however. The price He paid was for us, for our salvation, for our lives. The price He paid was the death that all of us should have suffered for our sin, which He took upon Himself on Calvary. All of this week, including the moments of prayer in Gethsemane which so firmed His resolve to

proceed, led up to that. As we journey through this week, from the Golden Gate to the garden, from the palace of Pilate to the hill on Calvary, may we never forget who it was that our Lord gave Himself so freely for, even you and I. Let us pray.

Gracious Lord, we stand in awe of your goodness and mercy, of the love for us which caused you to undergo such grief and anguish. We thank you for your sacrifice on our behalf, and for the life eternal which you have bestowed upon us. Make us ever worthy of your sacrifice, Lord, that all our life may be given freely and faithfully to you and your Kingdom, for it is in your name and for your sake that we ask it. Amen.