

SECOND READING: Mark 14:32-42

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32 They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” 33 He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. 34 “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them. “Stay here and keep watch.” 35 Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 36 “Abba, Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” 37 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Simon,” he said to Peter, “are you asleep? Couldn’t you keep watch for one hour? 38 Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” 39 Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. 40 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. 41 Returning the third time, he said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. 42 Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

FIRST READING: Psalm 46:1-10

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God is our refuge and strength, a very present<sup>[a]</sup> help in trouble. <sup>2</sup>Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;<sup>3</sup> though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.<sup>4</sup> There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. <sup>5</sup>God is in the midst of the city;<sup>[b]</sup> it shall not be moved; God will help it when the morning dawns. <sup>6</sup>The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. <sup>7</sup>The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>8</sup>Come, behold the works of the LORD; see what desolations he has brought on the earth. <sup>9</sup>He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. <sup>10</sup>“Be still, and know that I am God.

### *“Help”*

Well, something sort of funny happened to me on Thursday evening this week. It had been such a busy week. I looked at the clock. It was 9:15pm, and I was just then sitting down to begin the reading AND research for my sermon. Begin doing the research! That’s at least a day later than usual. So many things had come up during the week, and the days had flown by. I sighed, and then I realized that some of the next day, Friday, was also scheduled for something other than writing! I said under my breath, *“Well God, this is going to require pritt’ near a miracle”*. And then I had to just laugh...I think God was laughing too...as I typed the sermon title which was from the outline of the book we’re using. The title for the sermon, for the fifth word in our summer’s sermon series, is “Help”!

Saying, *“Help”*, crying out to God to lift the burden of our worries, to relieve our pain, to bring hope to our disappointments, is critical to our maintaining a life in the Spirit, a spiritual life. It is a move from self-reliance to God-reliance, a move beyond ourselves and, in fact, it is the essential expression of relationship, of connection with God. It has beautifully been described as response to the hidden workings of the Spirit within us, the Spirit creating in us a core longing so that God may fill us with Godself.<sup>1</sup> That’s an amazing thought isn’t it? Maria Boulding says, *“All our love, our stretching out, our hope, our thirst, God is creating in us so that [God] may fill us...God is on the inside of the longing.”*<sup>2</sup> So, as the old hymn goes, we need never be discouraged to take it to the Lord in prayer! *“Help”*. The 5<sup>th</sup> word is *“Help”*.

Now, some of our responses to the workings of the Spirit, some of our requests to God for *“help”* are more mature than others. Some of our petitions, our prayers, try to make God in to our *“personal assistant or fixer or genie, the enforcer of OUR will on earth”*.<sup>3</sup> My pastor used to call this our trying to make God into a coke machine...we put in our quarter (dollar) and expect to get out what we’ve prayed for. Certainly, if we’re honest a good number of our *“help”* prayers are of this type: *“I’m late again, God, because I’ve packed too many things into my schedule. Help me, Lord. Help me to hit all the green lights and get a close parking spot.*

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<sup>1</sup> Marjorie Thompson. *Soul Feast*. (Louisville: WJKP; 2014), 31.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Boulding. Quoted in Marjorie Thompson. *Soul Feast*. (Louisville: WJKF; 2014), 31.

<sup>3</sup> Brian McLaren. *Naked Spirituality*. (New York: Harper One; 2011), 105.

*Help*” A mature “*help*” prayer would ask God instead to remake us in God’s own image so that we can respond better to doing God’s work in the world. “*Lord, help me, to remember that you provide opportunities for work, you created time for rest too, and you want me to live a life that balances these. Liberate me from the fears and insecurities that drive me to fill my days too full, and help me settle into the healthy rhythm you’ve designed.*”<sup>4</sup>

The things which distinguish an immature petition from a mature one include obviously humility and honesty, an acceptance that we are nothing without God, that OUR wills need always submit to God’s, that nothing good is done without God’s help. It’s not as though we humans are doing fine on our own, and just need God to step in once in a while to tweak things a bit. No, God is the sovereign Lord, working God’s way in us and with us, respecting our freedom but yet rooting our lives and purposes in God’s will. This means that life will not be easy. No, not easy. But our struggles, with God walking along side of us, will result in our growth and maturity. This is why Paul says we can give thanks in (not for) times of trial, and James says we can receive trials with joy because they work like fertilizer for our growth.<sup>5</sup> God doesn’t want nor does God bring suffering, but when it comes, God is with us if we are with God. And through a regular practice of petition, of saying “*help*”, the bond between us and our Creator can grow stronger and stronger.

Jesus certainly shows us this on his last night on earth. When he goes to the Garden of Gethsemane, he tells Peter, James and John that his soul is “*overwhelmed with sorrow*” and he begins to pray a “*help me*” prayer. Never has he felt so alone. Even his friends are too tired to stay awake with him. Elsewhere we read that his sweat is like drops of blood falling to the ground. He peers into the dark pit of death and asks God, “*Can’t there be another way? Can’t you take this cup from me?*” Scholars have debated whether it was the human part of him that was begging to be delivered from what his divine part could see.<sup>6</sup> Regardless, he asks. But yet knows what he must do....for love of us. As Max Lucado so poetically says, “*He saw us right*

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<sup>4</sup> Brian McLaren. *Naked Spirituality*. (New York: Harper One; 2011), 105.

<sup>5</sup> McLaren, 107.

<sup>6</sup> Max Lucado. *The Final Week of Jesus*” (Dallas: Word Pub;1994 )93-94.

*there in the middle of a world which isn't fair. He saw us cast into the river of life we didn't request, betrayed by those we love, with bodies that get sick and hearts which grow weak. He saw us in our own garden of gnarled trees and sleeping friends, staring into our own pits of failure at the mouths of our own graves. And he didn't want US to be alone. He wanted us to know that he has been there too. He wanted us to know that he knows what it's like to be confused and torn between two desires, to smell the stench of Satan and to beg God to change God's mind, yet to hear God say ever so gently, 'no'.*<sup>7</sup> I believe it a very astute observation that while we all so often think the battle was won on Golgotha or in the tomb's garden on Easter morning, it really was won that night in Gethsemane amidst the olive trees. For when Jesus stood up straight, unclenched his fists and felt his heart to cease its fighting, the victory was sure. He was at peace with his decision...all of it following his request for "help" from his Abba, Father. His decision? He would do God's greater will for the world. *"He would rather go to hell for us than go to heaven without us."*<sup>8</sup> (Pause)

Now, saying all of this, it is important that we do not shrink from praying to God for ourselves, for our personal needs. In fact, it is a perfect recipe for total disaster to not do so. We become very inwardly focused, self-absorbed, floundering to be self-reliant if we don't. *"Oh, what peace we often forfeit...Oh what needles pain we bear."* Right? Giving our concerns over to God is essential to our souls' well-being. In addition, only when we let go and let God can we use the time we would be spending on ourselves on others.

For example, instead of being consumed by our anxieties, we might frame a prayer for "help" which allows us to: quit focusing on ways that we might fight or oppose our enemies and instead, after having given the problem over to God, be free to show compassion on these who stress us, to forgive them or learn to understand them better. Instead of focusing on how we might run from or avoid the problems which tie us up in knots, we can give the knot over to God and then show more patience with whoever is tying it, discover creative resolutions, or simply just work on finding inner courage or the humility to face the problem. A prayer of

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<sup>7</sup> Lucado, 93.

<sup>8</sup> Lucado, 94.

*“Help”* for our anxieties, big or little, can bring focus to a world which is sometimes just ablaze in chaos. It goes a long way to keeping the life-line with God healthy and whole.

We also need to offer a prayer for *“help”* when someone hurts us. Again, not doing so, can be disastrous. McClaren suggests that in addition to a unison Prayer of Confession each week, congregations should have a prayer of Acknowledgment of Pain of Being Hurt. It would not be about naming what we need the person who wronged us to do for us (whether they’ve abused, insulted, taken advantage of us, mocked us, lied about us, bullied us or cheated us) but how we long for God to help us. The psalmists knew to go to God with words like “rescue me from my pain,” “heal me,” “hold me up,” “hide me in you”, Lord. We can turn to the Psalms for great guidance, for words. Let’s use them. Brothers and sisters, we can be changed inside by our resentment and anger, and we risk passing it on if we do not get rid of the hurt done to us. Go to God with your prayers of hurt.

And finally, we need bring our disappointments to God in prayer. I think these are some of times when the connection with God can feel the strongest because we can lay bare our souls the most. We can express how crushed we are that we didn’t get the job, how broken we feel that the relationship we’ve had with that special person is over, and how very lonely, achingly lonely it is now that that chair at the table is empty. We can honestly express our anger that the lab report is positive, that we are now just lost that the promotion did not go through, and that we are feeling abandoned by God and everyone else with all that is going wrong in our lives. These prayers give us the best hope of receiving comfort and strength and *“help”* to get past it all or AT LEAST BE HEARD! And you know...that’s the thing...if we don’t go to God honestly in prayer, if we don’t have conversation, even if it’s angry and blaming, confused and frustrated conversation, then where are we? Well, we are still angry and blaming, confused and frustrated, but we are feeling alone too. And we are then vulnerable to other forces which can take control of us such that we begin to contemplate such things as retreat or self-hatred or despair or resignation or apathy or revenge.

Naming the need, honestly and very specifically, big AND small, whether it be a worry, a hurt, or a disappointment, is the first step toward healing, brothers and sisters. It is the way we

stay connected to God and the way we live fully Spirit-filled lives. It is the way we respond to the hidden workings of the Spirit within us, to the longing that needs be filled with God in us. And it is the way we also are ultimately then freed to see beyond ourselves to the bigger picture in doing God's will in the world. The psalmist sure had it right...*God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult. "Be still," God says, "and know that I am God."* Amen.