

The Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 1-2, 2017
Matthew 26:36-46

At the Crossroads: Obedience

Obedience – it’s something we expect from pets like the family dog... okay, not always, as I will attest from my own family’s dog who cannot control herself when she sees a squirrel or even hears the word “squirrel.” No kidding! Obedience – it’s something we *hope* for with our children... okay, not always, as any parent will attest from personal experience. Part of growing up is pushing the envelope and questioning obedience as we sort out what mom or dad wants vs. what I want. Obedience – it’s what we all want with traffic laws, right? We want this from all the other drivers out there, and from ourselves, too – except when we want to make exceptions for ourselves when we’re being inconvenienced by those traffic laws or we’re pressed for time or everybody else is being a jerk or... Obedience is a funny thing: we want it, but we often want it on our own terms, which sort of flies in the face of what obedience is. In this Lenten series, “At the Crossroads,” our focus has been on the crossroads that we face in life, especially in following Jesus. Sometimes these crossroads have concentrated on us with things like confession, betrayal, judgment, and denial, as we heard last week with Peter’s denial of Jesus and his declaration that he was not associated with the disciples or that he even knew Jesus. But some of these crossroads concentrate more on the Lord Jesus with things like compassion, as we heard two weeks ago as Jesus healed the servant of the high priest whose ear had been cut off when Jesus was arrested. Today, on this Fifth Sunday in Lent, we’re at the crossroads again. We find ourselves with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as he wrestles in prayer with obedience: his will or the Father’s will. This becomes the theme for preaching this day. May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Following the Passover meal with the disciples, in which Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper, they all headed out of Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley, and into the quiet refuge of this place called Gethsemane, located on the Mount of Olives. Gethsemane was an olive grove with a press in it for producing olive oil, which is what Gethsemane means in Aramaic, “oil press.” If you go to Jerusalem today, you can visit a place called the Garden of Gethsemane, although the actual location of the one mentioned in Scripture is unknown. There are some very old olive trees to be found here (some nearly 1000 years old), but none from the time of Christ. It is here, in the quiet and darkness of this place called Gethsemane, that Jesus wrestles in prayer with obedience. Leaving the larger group of disciples behind, Jesus takes the inner circle of Peter, James, and John further into the garden with him. He told them what was going on and what he needed from them: **“My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me”** (Matthew 26:38). But after the heavy Passover meal, and the four cups of wine that went with it, the disciples found it hard to stay awake. Not once, or twice, but three times, Jesus returns from prayer to find them sleeping. Jesus’ words to Peter are spoken to us as well: **“So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak”** (Matthew 26:40b-41). When it comes to our own obedience to Jesus, our watching and praying, we know all too well that however much our spirit may be willing, our flesh is so very weak. We fall asleep, we fall away, we fall from grace.

What was it that Jesus was wrestling with so intensely there in the Garden of Gethsemane? Matthew’s account tells us this clearly: **“My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will”** (Matthew 26:39), and **“My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done”** (Matthew 26:42). There is the struggle for obedience! In his human nature as the Son of man, Jesus wrestles with what is to come, and what this will mean for him. So intense and powerful was this struggle, that Luke records Jesus’ sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground (Luke 22:44). This is an actual medical condition called hematomatidrosis. Under extreme physical or

emotional stress a person's capillary blood vessels that feed the sweat glands rupture, causing the condition (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hematidrosis>). Here in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus is at a critical crossroads! The future – *our* future – depends on which road Jesus chooses. That cup image and drinking from it is one found frequently in the Old Testament (Isaiah 51:22; Jeremiah 25:15, 17, 28; 49:12; Ezekiel 23:32; Habakkuk 2:16). It refers to the cup of God's wrath; his fierce anger and punishment for sin and disobedience. Alone in the garden in the dead of night, Jesus comes face-to-face with the awful purpose of his life and mission: to drink down to the dregs the cup of God's righteous judgment on the sin and disobedience of his people. Though he is the sinless Son of God, Jesus is also the Son of man, a human being, and in the frailty of his humanity Jesus cries out to his Father: **“Let this cup pass from me!”** Knowing what lies ahead of him, Jesus chooses obedience over disobedience. He chooses the Father's will over his own will. He chooses us over himself. That life of perfect obedience that we can never see in ourselves, we see in Jesus, who submitted his fears, his desires, his will, to that of the Father. Jesus' obedience would soon lead to betrayal, rejection, scorn and ridicule, a mock trial and injustice, political expediency, torture, and death on the cross as a common criminal. That was the mighty struggle in Gethsemane.

Ten years ago, our congregation read through the book, *Why Pray?*, by John DeVries, during Lent 2007. It was in this little book that I discovered an important spiritual truth, one which I share with you now. John DeVries writes in a chapter entitled, “Prayer Is Work,” the following: “Haddon Robinson first called my attention to prayer as work by asking me the question ‘Where did Jesus do the work of the atonement? In the garden, in the judgment hall, or on the cross?’ Robinson said that in his estimation the real work of the atonement came when Christ sweat drops like blood, agonizing in prayer in the garden. Because Christ did the work of prayer, He could enter Pilate's judgment hall with quiet confidence, and on the cross He could say, ‘Father forgive them’” (*Why Pray? 40 Days – From Words to Relationship*, by John F. DeVries. Grand Rapids: Mission India, 2005; p. 57). I say to you that without Gethsemane there could not have been Golgotha. Had Jesus not wrestled in that agony of prayer, submitting his own will to that of the Father, he could not have done what he did. At the crossroads of our salvation, Jesus **“became obedient unto death, even death on a cross”** (Philippians 2:8).

Because Jesus became obedient unto death, even death on a cross, for our sake, we are now called to become obedient unto life for his sake. Christ died for us that we might live for him! When we wrestle with submitting our own will to that of our heavenly Father, when we struggle with praying “Thy will be done,” when we are tempted to take the easy and expedient way out over against the hard road of following Jesus, at these crossroads of life Jesus is there with his mercy and his grace to help in time of need. We have this assurance: **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”** (Romans 8:1). Because in Christ there is now no condemnation for us, this works a new obedience in our lives – an obedience that is not begrudging, half-hearted, or that keeps score. Our new obedience flows out of a heart that is filled with thanks and praise to God for the gift of forgiveness, life, and salvation that is ours in Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.