“***Deeply Grieved***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Mar. 28 (Palm Sunday), 2020

**Mark 14:25–38**

25“Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

26 When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. 27And Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters; for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.” 28But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” 29Peter said to him, “Even though all become deserters, I will not.” 30Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this day, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” 31But he said vehemently, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And all of them said the same.

32 They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” 33He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. 34And he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake.” 35And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. 36He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” 37He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? 38Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

As we gather together today, we can imagine the apostles gathered in the upper room. This is set on Thursday night, called Maundy Thursday because of the mandate that Jesus gave them, “Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34). They share a meal, and Jesus institutes the Remembrance Supper. After the meal, they sing a hymn. Then Jesus, worried about the apostles, warns them by quoting phrases from the prophet he had used previously, Zechariah, to say that the shepherd will be struck and the sheep will be scattered.

Peter, full of bravado, says that even if everybody else deserts, *he* will stay loyal, even giving his life, rather than denying Jesus. We know how *that* boast turned out. Peter, confronted by a servant girl, denied Jesus three times; then, realizing his failure, “he broke down and wept” (Mark 14:66–72). It’s interesting that all of the apostles make the same boast about not denying Jesus. They often reproduce each other’s behavior, usually in ways that don’t reflect well on them. They are all jostling for position within the kingdom, or they are all trying and failing to cast out demons, or they are hoping Jesus will seize power as a military Messiah. These are materialistic peer-group behaviors that the apostles carry with them. On Pentecost, there is finally some positive imitative behavior, when, after the Spirit is poured out on them, they all show courage and energy for preaching the gospel. “All of them said the same” seems to be their theme song, for bad or good.

In the garden of Gethsemane, Peter’s, James’, and John’s falling asleep may be a manifestation of their unwillingness to really face what is going to happen to Jesus. Jesus has been warning them, probably for many weeks, of what is coming. They halfway accept it, but not fully. It is too awful to accept; denial is their way of trying to keep it from happening. If they had really accepted the fact that tragedy was going to happen, as Jesus had foretold, they would have been alert and nervous, rather than sleepy.

At least to some degree, they were all in denial. Certainly they *meant* well, but they had not yet tapped into the full courage and conviction they would need, and would receive, in the following days. They were truly tested by these events. That human condition of *meaning* well but not being strong enough is indicated by “the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mark 14:38). Eventually their flesh will become strong enough, after the Spirit has come.

Probably we’ve all had that experience, where our higher inclinations draw us one way, but our fatigue, or our immaturity, or our lack of focus draw us another way. If we are fortunate, then we have an experience that brings our failure home to us; we feel ashamed, disappointed in ourselves. Fear not; this is a learning opportunity. Perhaps this painful experience can push us to sharpen our focus, to try to get all our faculties—physical, mental, and spiritual—lined up and pointed in one direction. The experience may teach us to become more dedicated, more empathetic, and more patient with ourselves and others. We could be like athletes who strive to always get better, to learn from sub-par performances and to work on keeping their concentration. If we have learned from previous experiences, then we are better able to handle the challenges when the next difficulty comes. If we obey the mandate to love one another as we go through these experiences, others will see us as leaders and be inspired by our example.

Ballplayers have weeks of spring training; actors have rehearsals. What are some of the exercises *we* can do to get in shape, spiritually? Practice, that is, read the Bible and some helpful theology books. Pray. Remember to spend some time in receptive listening and openness, asking for nothing. Be ready to listen to God. Then come together in spiritual gatherings to share. When we share with others how we overcame and triumphed, then others may be strengthened. And remember that God loves you, even when you have disappointing days. God helps you up every time you fall, and is ready to give you a pep talk so you can do better next time.

In Gethsemane, the human Jesus is trying to ready himself for what is coming. It is hard. He throws himself on the ground and prays, and at one point he asks if he can be delivered from the coming death. But Jesus has decided he will not work miracles for his own benefit. He will complete the earth life without any supernatural power. He will accept the Father’s will, and that will is that Jesus live through this earth life to the end, to receive the full experience. He is “deeply grieved” (14:34), not only because he doesn’t want to have to go through that death, but also because it deeply hurts his heart that his fellow countrymen could be so spiritually dead. Jesus’ tender heart was hurt when he saw hate and nastiness on people’s faces, as when his enemies confronted him with insincere questions. This honest and loving man is heartbroken by the ill will of the priests, and the brutish obedience of a portion of the population.

His sorrow was real and profound when he wept for Jerusalem, foreseeing the day that armies would besiege the city; he was sorry for “you and your children” (Luke 19:41–44). He was also heartbroken to be leaving his disciples in a time of danger.

He was always thinking of others. Even when he scolds Peter for sleeping, he says “Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial” (14:38), foreseeing Peter’s mental and emotional trial. But Peter is destined to go through great distress, because he hasn’t yet focused wholeheartedly enough. Not having honed his spiritual skills, his difficulties will be prolonged. He will deny Jesus and then go through not only grief over Jesus’ death, but guilt over his own denial. Yet Jesus never stops loving him or trusting him. After the Resurrection, during his appearance in Galilee, he acknowledges that Peter loves him, and charges Peter to “feed my sheep” (John 21:17). You see, he is *trusting* him with leadership. Now, like Peter, we are not without our faults, yet Jesus loves us as we are now, and he loves our future selves that will grow closer to him, and through him, to God. “All are precious in his sight.” He knows us and cherishes us, each one individually. And we can love him back.

Being focused does not mean that tribulations go away; but just that one is better able to weather the storms. Part of what should help us focus is remembering Jesus’ mandate: “Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. . . Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. . . My peace I give to you” (John 13:34; 14:1, 27). Receive Jesus into your heart, like the crowd that joyously welcomed Jesus with psalms and palm leaves on Palm Sunday. Even as you enthusiastically receive him, receive his command into your heart, as well. This will empower you to reflect his character, and partake of his courage. It is never too late to learn to follow Jesus, and to trust his love for us.