

Should I say: ‘Father, save me from this hour’?

Hespeler, March 17, 2024 © Scott McAndless – Fifth Sunday in Lent
Jeremiah 31:31-34, Psalm 119:9-16, Hebrews 5:5-10, John 12:20-33

Can I be honest with you for a moment? This Sunday is not really every minister’s favourite Sunday in the calendar year. After worship today we will be gathering as a congregation for our annual meeting. And annual meetings are really important because it is important that the people of the church be given a voice and decision-making power on significant things in the life of a congregation – things like the budget, trustees, leadership and policy.

But, of course, in order to allow that to happen, we have to create some space in which dissenting voices can be heard and where people are allowed to disagree with one another. This, again, is healthy, normal and an essential part of a constructive meeting, but it is not always comfortable. And it can be particularly uncomfortable for those who serve as clergy. We know that things will be discussed that might affect our stipend and other aspects of our life that are very important to us just like they would be to anyone else.

Difficult Hours

So, as I talk together with my fellow ministers, we will often commiserate around days like this. That’s why the words of Jesus in our gospel reading this morning kind of spoke to me as I thought about what I would preach during this hour. **“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say: ‘Father, save me from this hour’?”**

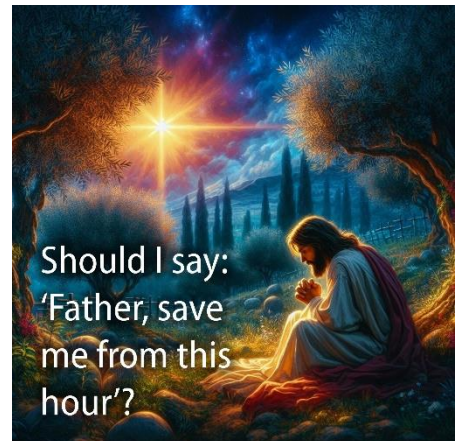
And I hardly mean to trivialize the very great challenge that Jesus knew he was facing. I hardly mean to create a false equivalence between what he suffered and the difficult hours that you or I may face.

He certainly wasn’t just dealing with the prospect of a meeting where people might say things he didn’t want to hear. No, Jesus had come down to Jerusalem and had a very reasonable expectation that he would be arrested, convicted, and killed in the most painful way possible here. When he feels troubled and considers asking to be saved from the hour that he faces, it gives us all a different perspective on any of the difficult hours that we have faced in our lives.

Minimizing our Struggles

But, at the same time, I don’t want to minimize any of these troubles that we do face. If you are suffering for any reason, you have every right to your feelings and your distress and you shouldn’t let anyone minimize it.

And you might get impression that you should if you read this passage in the Gospel of John alone. I mean, yes, Jesus speaks about the trouble in his soul and his desire to be saved from the hour, but he certainly doesn’t seem to wallow in such feelings for very long at all. He immediately goes on to say, **“No,”** no I will not ask to be saved from this



hour because **“it is for this reason that I have come to this hour.”** Does that mean that any negative feelings we may have or any desire to be spared we might express are all illegitimate? Is Jesus saying we shouldn’t feel or want such things? I am not so sure.

The Garden of Gethsemane

In the other gospels, Jesus expresses similar sentiments when he is in the Garden of Gethsemane. He says to his disciples in eerily similar words, **“My soul is deeply grieved, even to death.”** (Mark 14:34) And then Jesus goes over by himself to pray and ask very specifically that he might be spared from the hour that is coming, saying, **“Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me.”** (v.36)

So, we have almost exactly the same words that we find in John. But where in John, Jesus’ soul only seems to grieve for a moment and he quickly rejects the very idea that he should ask to be spared, in the other gospels Jesus remains in that grief and that desire to escape for a very long time – for an hour at least. And it is an hour of complete and utter agony as Jesus wrestles with God over what is going to happen to him.

And yes, he always ends his plea by saying, **“yet not what I want but what you want,”** (v.36) but you certainly do not get the impression that he comes to that reconciliation easily or quickly. His hour in the garden has got to be one of the worst hours of his life – only to be overshadowed, of course, by what is about to come!

Reconciling the Passages

And you may well ask how we are supposed to reconcile what Jesus says here in the Gospel of John with the accounts of the Garden of Gethsemane, but I don’t necessarily see this as a contradiction. Sure, John may not want to dwell on Jesus’ desire to escape the fate that awaits him, and he skips over it immediately, but that doesn’t mean that Jesus didn’t dwell *in* it in the garden. The agony in Jesus’ heart was real during that hour. It is just that John wants to look at the agony of Jesus from another angle because he wants to teach us something very important about those difficult hours in our lives and how we can navigate them well.

In particular, John wants us to understand where Jesus landed after that hour of agony and how Jesus became to be reconciled to what came next. You see, there is always a temptation when you face a difficult hour. Your natural inclination, if it simply cannot be avoided, is just to grit your teeth and clench your fists and get through it so that you can forget about it as quickly as possible as you get on with your life. We attempt to minimize those moments. That may be understandable, but it is not what Jesus does.

The Purpose of Such Hours

Jesus explains to the crowd that such hours have a purpose and that they are meant to bring you to a place where you finally understand one of the deepest truths of this life, a truth that he sums up like this: **“Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit.”**

Now, it is pretty clear what this means in the light of what we all know that Jesus is about to face. He knows that he is heading towards something that will bring his death in a very painful way.

And he also knows, and this is made clear many times in this gospel, that he will be raised from the dead. And so, he is the grain of wheat that dies and comes back in new life.

Not Just About What Happens to Jesus

But part of what Jesus is saying here is that his death and resurrection is not just for him. The new sprout that will come from the seed that dies in the ground is not just a new chance at life for him. The new life he is obtaining is for the whole world and for us as well.

At the same time, though, this is not just about what is going to happen to Jesus or what he accomplishes for us. Jesus is here proclaiming a universal principle and one that is central to the Christian faith.

The truth is that we as Christians only have one model for renewal, and that model is death and resurrection. Jesus has shown us the way, but we are all called to continue to walk in it. And that is the particular challenge we are given whenever we face a difficult hour, crisis or trial. We are called not merely to survive it but to have the faith to pass through it by dying to what we need to die to and being raised up to new life.

Your Relationships

Have you ever faced a difficult time in a key relationship in your life? Relationships are not easy and if any relationship is authentic, there will be times when you disagree or fight or even struggle to love the other.

And because such times can be so difficult, the temptation may be to merely survive them. You may avoid the conflict. You try not to talk about it, change the subject when the point of disagreement comes up. You think that if you ignore the conflict, it will go away on its own. And maybe sometimes it even seems to, but I'll guarantee you that it will come back in some new form sooner or later!

Another strategy you may resort to in such a circumstance is using dominance and power (whatever power is available to you) to browbeat your relationship partner into just giving in to eliminate the point of conflict. Again, that may seem to make the difficult time go away, but it doesn't really solve anything and only means that the times that come get worse as you go along.

No, if you really value your relationship, what you have to do is enter into a possibly even more difficult time when you risk yourself, where you choose to die to something in yourself that has been malignant in your relationship. Only in such death can new life be found for your relationship.

Other Difficult Hours

That is just one example, of course. I know we all face difficult hours in our lives and each one presents unique challenges. They may come in terms of health issues or medical treatments. They may come in difficult work-related issues or financial struggles. We've all been there and we will all be there again.

I think it would be helpful for all of us to hold onto the formula Jesus gives us in the Gospel of John. It is usually not helpful to just try and avoid such hours. Rather than seeking to be saved from them, we find our way through them, asking what we need to die to in order to be raised to new life.

Annual Meetings

Which brings me back to where I started and the attitude that clergy may bring to annual meetings. Do they need to be difficult hours that we should seek to be saved from? Of course not.

And there's no reason to think that this meeting will be a difficult one. Indeed, I do not expect that. My desire to be saved from such meetings, is more based on past trauma than on the reality of our current situation. But that being said, it is not as if we don't have some difficult questions to deal with as a congregation.

And the reality is that, when that is the case, we might enter into such an hour with a **"Father, save me from this hour"** kind of attitude. Such an attitude might lead us to simply brush over or even ignore those issues that could cause tension among us.

In my experience, churches can be really good at doing that kind of thing. Whenever the hard topics come up, we just kind of change the subject.

The other temptation, the one that we often resort to when we are feeling personally vulnerable, is to become aggressive and maybe even take a bullying approach with others. We think that if we can just beat others in submission, we can impose a better situation for ourselves.

And then there are others whose instinct, whenever something feels a little bit controversial, is simply to back down and become completely passive.

These kinds of reactions may feel as if they work for us, as if they are getting us through a difficult hour. But I do not believe that they lead to where we need to go and that is new life. We don't need to be saved from a difficult hour, we need to be raised to new life.

To What Do We Need to Die?

So, this is what I would challenge us all to do, including myself, as we move towards an hour that could have some uncomfortable moments. Ask yourself what you need to die to in order to find new life.

As a congregation, I think there may be some attitudes that we need to die to. We need to die to an assumption we often easily make that we are somehow better than some other congregations, perhaps because they are dealing with struggles that we're not right now. As a congregation and as churches around here, I suspect we need to die to the assumption that we can thrive on our own and that the loss of other ministries doesn't affect us.

And maybe above all, we need to die to our tendency to think only in terms of what we can get from the church so that we can be born again to a new attitude concerning what we can all give to the work of Christ through the church together.

But understand this, whatever we may have to die to, there is a purpose. When the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, that's not the end of the story. That is the new beginning. That is what Jesus was promising us. So, I will not pray, **'Father, save me from this hour.'** I hope you don't either.