

April 9, 2017, Palm Sunday of the Passion

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Focus: The cross is the answer.

When people ask me my favorite part of our trip to the Holy Land, I always answer the Garden of Gethsemane. In fact, Nikki and I ended up going there twice. There are olive trees that have been tested and it is indeed possible that they are thousands of years old. They would have seen the arrest of Jesus on that fateful evening. There is a Church of All Nations built on the site that lives up to the name: nuns from Europe on a pilgrimage, tourists from the east snapping pictures, and our group of Americans. There is even a rock in front of the altar where it is said Jesus prayed those last agonizing hours.

I love that place. I love those trees, and I love that rock. Not that my faith depends on whether he prayed on this particular rock, or whether all the trees were really there. But because at this moment, on this night on which the entire mission depends, the night for which he became flesh, dwelt among us, the night for which he healed and taught, the night for which he performed miracles and signs and wonders, on this night, at this rock, we find Jesus at his most human. We find him praying in tears of anguish: “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” We find Jesus, the Son in whom God is well-pleased, praying with, pleading to the Father. “If it is possible”—we know that with God all things are possible—“remove this cup.”

And the answer is No.

Lake I thought on Wednesday preached a beautiful sermon on prayer: what it isn't and what it is. And it's true: so often prayer can become a heaping up of empty phrases or a stringing together of pious words, or praying for what we think we ought instead of what is on our hearts. We are all guilty of that. But my guess is that we all have real prayers, too. They don't get spoken aloud during the Prayers of the People. They are the prayers that take place “in the silence of our hearts.” The prayers known only to us and to God. Prayers to save a marriage or a relationship, prayers to keep a job or find meaningful work, prayers for a child, prayers for a dying loved one, prayers when we can't beat an addiction, prayers for a family member who has dementia.

Those prayers are holy to our Father. Sacred is the prayer that speaks in the silence of our hearts.

And yet, not what we want, but what you want. I don't know why God sometimes doesn't answer our most sacred and holy prayers. I don't know how God with whom all things are possible couldn't remove this cup from his beloved Son. The cross never makes sense.

But it is the only answer that Jesus receives to his prayer. Jesus had the faith to pray what is so hard for us: “thy will be done.” He had the faith to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane when he was deeply grieved, even to death, “not what I want, but what you want.” Jesus had the faith to trust in God even when the only answer was the cross.

Can we join him in Gethsemane? Can we trust in God whose answers don't make sense to us and whose road always runs through Golgotha? When we do, we will find a cross prepared there: not for us, but for this brave, this faithful, this grieved man who on that Friday all those years ago was nailed to it. Nailed there with every unanswered prayer throughout all the

centuries past and to come: your prayers and mine. That it might be possible for the heart of God to speak one more time in the silence of an early Sunday morning. **Amen.**