

Message: Matthew 26:31-46:

Friends! Let's pray before we begin today!

Prayer:**Introduction:**

Today's passage is...it's a bomb waiting to go off. Or it feels like one, to me. There are scenes in the Gospels that feel, oh, not negligible, but sort of routine. The point's on the surface, or it's a scene that's kind of irrelevant to our moment in history, the passage isn't "meh," per se., but it's not arresting, it's not fascinating.

Today's scene fascinates me. To talk about it feels like I'm handling something that could explode at any moment, and when it explodes, who knows? Candy and streamers could fly out, or it could kill me.

Do you get what I'm saying here? This passage feels like holy ground to me, feels like something we ought not touch, a rare vase. And yet, holy ground is just dirt, made holy by the presence of God. A rare vase was dirt, too, made precious by attentive skill.

And I've been thinking about dirt the whole time I read this passage.

Dirt:

I think there's dirt all over this passage, in all sorts of ways. Dirt that needs brushed off, because it's a passage that many of us might be familiar with, but needs our attention, a second look, like some coin we find in the yard.

More than this, though, I think the passage is caked with humility. Jesus is humble, and his best friends are, ultimately, humiliated.

Humility's root word is *humus*, is *earth*, *dirt*. When we're humble we remember that we're dust, created not creators, we're brought low to the ground from which Genesis tells us we people were first made. And more than anything else, I was stopped in my tracks by all the lowness in today's passage.

Jesus face touches the dirt in prayer. His best friends lay on it, and sleep. He'll tell them to rise up off the ground after he himself does. He embraces humility, recognizes that compared to God the Father's highness, he is low. He doesn't claim any rights, other than the right, the freedom, of obedience to God.

His best friends are humiliated, brought low by their exhaustion, which they gave into, and Jesus' reproof, which they deserve. Their lack of attention to God drives them into the dirt, and yet Jesus doesn't leave them in the dust, race on ahead of them, but calls them, in the end, back to himself.

Let's walk through it, and I'll just hope it doesn't explode on us. We'll see what we see.

Walking Through: Recognition

First, we're set up for something we're not going to talk about today, but will happen very soon. Jesus and the disciples just celebrated Passover together, that remembrance feast that inspires our Communion. Last week, Rudy talked to us about that time. They've left their meal. Jesus just promised that one of them would betray him, and all protested. They head to the Mount of Olives, because they're following Jesus, and he's taking them there.

He says, almost casually,

“This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written:

***“I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep of the flock will be
scattered.”[c]***

***32 But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you
into Galilee.”***

He’s quoting a passage from Zechariah that promises a time when “a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity.” It’s a time when a remnant will choose the way of the Lord, and God will say of them, “They are my people.” It’s a weird passage that promises that God will turn away from God’s chosen shepherd of His people, and that very abandonment will be the thing that sets in motion redemption.

We realize that Jesus, in this moment, recognizes not only his death, but the deep sense of abandonment he’ll give voice to in just a little while. He recognizes what’s going to come to him. “Awake, sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!” declares the Lord Almighty. “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered...”

Walking Through: Resolve

Peter, ever eager, Jesus' best friend, speaks up:

33 Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."

34 "Truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times."

35 But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the other disciples said the same.

It's their second great promise of the night, and it's earnest and brave and wonderful, and empty.

And I've been thinking about the surety of this promise they've made. We make promises, you know? We believe the best about ourselves, just like this lot. One of them is a liar, lying. The others truly, madly, deeply believe what they are saying. They believe they're willing to die for Jesus, embrace the dirt that they've come from, rather than abandon him. But they are all wrong, Jesus' best friend Peter more wrong than the rest, and we know it.

And the only wonder in this, the tragic miracle, is that this...earnestness, it's just not that uncommon. We believe ourselves, too, when we make the promises of loyalty that we make. We never mean to break our promises, our pledges, our oaths. We never mean to abandon people, we never mean to break the promises we make to God, and yet...we find ourselves, after the fact, after we've broken the promises we've made, astonished, self-recriminating, wondering how we got to where we got.

Hear me: The disciples didn't realize that they were going to be humiliated, were going to to end up in the dirt. In some real ways they didn't understand themselves, and Peter, of course, is our standard for someone without self-awareness. Humility has to precede promises; only in seeing who we are, really, can we truthfully say what we'll do when faced with a crises. And we can only see who we are when we recognize God for who God is.

Jesus does.

They arrive at a place called Gethsemane, which is spelled in the most ridiculous way possible. Jesus tells

his disciples to sit while he goes to pray. They do.

Gethsemane: Keep Watch

He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee [that is, James and John] along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

Jesus, in his grief, invites the one thing that we need most in our grief, which is the presence of those who love us. He asks his best friends to stay with him. To be near him. He doesn't ask their advice, he doesn't even ask them to pray for him. He asks only that they stay with him. “Keep watch with me.” I feel like I'm dying, stay awake with me.

39 Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

We'll talk of this in a moment. But this happens right after it:

40 Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. 41 "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Hear me: This is a powerful statement Jesus makes. We use it for all sorts of things. We use it to talk about how much we wish we could be what we wish we could be, and how, when we fail, well...we at least wanted to succeed. Every time we give into our favorite sin, if our consciences are still stung by it--and that's not always the case--this passage speaks to that sort of moment. And yet in this moment, the failure isn't some great sin, it's a failure of friendship, a failure of solidarity, a failure of love. Jesus speaks to Peter particularly, because it's Peter who will most terrifically and tragically stomp his own resolve into the dirt in a short, short while.

Failing in friendship humiliates us, as it should. And yet, the grace of friendship is that forgiveness drives it, and when we fail, it offers us to it again.

42 He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”

43 When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. 44 So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

Jesus has three times of prayer, and in each one he goes to the ground, not because his eyes are heavy, but because his heart is. And head to the dirt, he prays. The first time just slightly different from the second and third, to us, but Matthew recognizes the same sentiment in each, and we should, too.

The first time, Jesus prays, bending his head to the ground in submission to God as his friends lay down on it in submission to their exhaustion, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” Then, a second time, prayer whose only recorded words are “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.” The third time follows this.

“My Father...”

Humility, earthiness, begins with “My Father.” It begins with a recognition that God the Father is God, and we ourselves are not. But far more than this, it begins with the recognition that God is our good parent who is close to us. To say “My Father” is to claim, as Jesus does, that we really are God’s well-loved children who make God very happy. Humility is learned in relationships, it’s learned as we discover that we are not in charge of our lives.

We grow out of this discovery as adults. We shake it off, even though the awareness that we’re not in control is forced on us every time we’re told what to do by some law, some bank, some boss. And yet, humility is what comes when we embrace the truth that we are children, no matter how old we are, and that we are children of a good parent who, despite giving us enormous freedoms, makes demands on our lives. We are not self-determining.

But we tell ourselves we are, and having gathered a certain amount of whatever gives us power in whatever society we live in--cash, guns, water, information--people tend to forget that they are not

self-made. To be a human is to be a child, and whether our parents are good or bad, absent or present, wise or fools, God the Father reckons all of us His children, to raise as He, in his inexhaustible goodness, reckons we ought to be raised.

“...this cup...”

Recognizing God is his Father, Jesus asks something of him in this moment where he feels like he’s dying. It’s a good place to start. Humility always asks, because what else can it do? Humiliation never drives us to ask questions. But recognizing that we are not self-made, that we are not-determined, that we are children to a good parent, we discover there is no harm in asking, because there is no harm in hearing “No.” Hearing “No” doesn’t destroy our relationship, doesn’t make us less a child deserving of a response. When we give up asking questions--of God, of ourselves, of anyone--it is a sign of a terrible, terrible danger. Because to ask questions freely is to acknowledge ourselves as worthwhile.

And what this person asks, as a child of God, is that the “cup” he will drink from might be taken away from him. Jesus asks not to undergo the trouble he knows

he's going to have to undergo. The "cup" is shorthand for all the worst of the terror he is about to face: The sadness, the sense of being forsaken, the real abandonment of all his friends, all those who believe in him and think he can do it, but who just run away. He'll be beaten, cut up, go thirsty, and be shamed.

And he doesn't want to, and we get it, right? Who'd want to do that? So, the first time: "If it's possible, may this cup be taken from me."

"Yet..."

But he goes on, "Yet."

It's a tiny word. Nonetheless. Regardless. Still.

But "yet" is humility's heartbeat. Yet is what happens when you put your face in the dirt, your heart on your sleeve, and ask something of someone who can say no. Yet means this:

Even though what I've just said, discount it if it needs discounted.

Here's my want. Here's my heart. Here's my desire.
Still. Yet:

“As you will.”

Jesus, facedown in the dirt, lays it all out: I am your child. I want this. I want to avoid all the kinds of pain that are coming my way. Nonetheless: “Not as I will, but as you will.”

Few people get this. Saints and poets maybe. But Jesus is giving voice to a total acceptance of what God wills that we rarely experience, much less see in the lives around us. This isn't just humility, it's something more...it's humility full-grown, matured. It's a willingness to partner with God's will, even if it means great, great suffering. God, who loves us, does not want to punish us, will not force us, will not entice or trick us into accepting his will for our lives.

God seeks to have us seek him, to discover that it is good to be His child, and that his will is not only good for him, but good for us, too. God, our Father, seeks to make of us his partners, just as Jesus made us not his followers, but his friends, his equals. But we partner in God's will.

We accept that there is more at work in the world than

we can see or imagine, and God will work out all things for the good of those who are called, according to his purposes, not our own. Humility, matured, is when we who were shaped from dirt, accept that we have been shaped for noble, good purposes that we don't understand.

But there is more to this, because it seems, in a world driven by death, that redemption and hope and intimacy are discovered on the way through suffering and sorrow. Jesus accepts the cup because it is our Father's will. But the cup hasn't been taken from the world; until he returns we are either those who bow our faces down to the dirt we were fashioned from, or we are those who fall into the dirt because we can't stay up with God who calls us friend, and gives us the power to strengthen our spirit and overcome our weak flesh. The way to redemption is marked by sorrow. It's what it means to live in a fallen world. Humility embraces God's will even knowing that it means we'll drink from a cup we'd rather escape from, because our good Father will see us through even that, and salvation will break out because of it.

The alternative is also true, and it is a gift: In our suffering, when we feel as if we're dying inside, or

when we nearly, really, are, it's most often the case that we realize, as we kiss the dirt, that our suffering, the cup we drink from, is a gift. At least some of humility comes from accepting that our sorrows and sadness are things to be embraced, rather than rejected. Embraced because while joy is rare in the world, sorrow and sadness are not; they are what's most true to the human experience, and because Jesus himself knew a depth of grief that we know, grief becomes a, oh, a sort of sacrament, or a kiss, a place where heaven and earth mix, for a moment, in our shared experience. This is why repentance is so important; it starts in the sad realization that we have failed, and goes from there into power and glory and permanent hope.

Every sadness is a gate into a safe place where we realize that God is intimately on our side. But humility, our face in the dirt, is the key that opens that place up to us.

“Here comes my betrayer.”

The third time Jesus comes back to his friends who have failed him, he comes back to them with a resolve to accept God's will that is unlike, entirely, their

resolve to die with him. He has kissed the dirt, embraced humility, discovered the deep acceptance that whatever God, his good Father, wills is better than what he wants. The disciples have, simply, been sleeping. All have been on the ground; only one has embraced it. And they are humiliated here, and further humiliated soon, because of it.

45 Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. 46 Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

Next week we'll see what happens as his betrayer arrives.

Conclusion:

Today, though:

I know this: To attend to this passage, and sit up with it as if you're sitting with someone who is dying, is a dangerous thing. Because, as you keep watch there, you are forced to sit with yourself, too.

Jesus' best friends just fell asleep. They couldn't do it.

However tired they were, they couldn't deal with the humility of the one they believed in, who they thought could do anything, dropping his face to the ground and feeling like he was dying. And any of us, who have ever felt as if we ourselves were dying, we've known what it's like to have our friends fail us. And we know what it's like, too, to fail our friends in this particular way, this inability to be present when all they want is our presence. Instead we bring chatter, we bring diversion, we bring anything but our simple presence. We would do well to keep watch with people in their grief.

Because grief, sorrow, suffering--the cup, these troubles that come upon us through the betrayal of others, through life in a death-driven world--our suffering is a place where God is always ready to meet us, because the Son of God, the Son of Man, our brother and Lord and savior and friend gets it, knows suffering, and he will not fail in his friendship to us the way his friends failed him.

But Jesus wants us to know what he discovered, which is that to embrace the dirt from which we're made, to practice humility is necessary if we're ever to know the unshakeable strength of accepting that we are

partners in our Father God's will for us; purposes that are good, pleasing, and perfect. Humility matures into acceptance that we are children, always, and our parent is wiser, kinder, more long-sighted, and knows what is in our best interest all the time.

We can embrace the humility of Christ, receive the strong drink in the cup that comes our way, and discover a strength that carries us through suffering to God, or we can embrace the way of Jesus' failing friends, which leads to our humiliation. Ultimately, of course, it leads us back around to Go, and we're given another chance to choose a better way.

Humility or Humiliation? On the dirt with heavy hearts, or with heavy eyelids? Partnering in God's our Father's will, or rejecting God the Son's pleading? These are choices we've faced, are facing, and will face, and I pray the Spirit helps us choose for our own good, and God's, too.