

Palm Sunday / Passion Sunday
March 28, 2021
Lenten Lessons from the Garden
Part Six: “The Garden of Sorrows”
“The Spiritual Practice of Holding Space”
A Sermon Based on Mark 14:32-42
By Rev. Ruth Ragovin



Andrea Mantegna's *Agony in the Garden*, circa 1460

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MARK 14: 32-42 (New Revised Standard Version)

³²They 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." ³⁹And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. ⁴⁰And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. ⁴¹He came a third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴²Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

Over these many years I have had the privilege of ministering to and alongside the congregation of First Christian Church of Murray, KY, whose souls God has entrusted to my care. It is an honor and the most sacred of all trusts and tasks. This past week when I looked through our church's directories both from this year and years past, I realize that, despite your many differences, each of you has one thing in common. You all have been visited by some kind of suffering in your own life or that of a family member or close friend: a debilitating illness, the death of a loved one, betrayal, the breakup of a relationship or marriage, economic insecurity, job loss, addiction, mental health challenges, loneliness, incarceration, despair, and depression. This past year, when our church has been closed to in-person worship because of the pandemic, has been especially difficult. Many more than usual have struggled with anxiety and depression.

You know that we kind of skirt around the topic of depression. We don't like to talk about it. "How are you?" we might ask someone. The nice polite Southern answer is "Fine, thanks! How are you?" "Fine," we answer. It really is a rhetorical question we don't expect to be answered. We don't want to be privy to the anguish, anxiety, fear, loneliness, despondency, despair or suffering that may be the truth. We don't want to hear that someone is depressed. Indeed, there was a time when faith communities even considered depression a sin or a moral failure because it signified a lack of faith.

And, even though most faith communities no longer believe that, we still shy away from people who are feeling low. Probably because in facing their depression, their pain, we face our own inadequacies in knowing what to say and we also are reminded of our own darkness, our own fears, our loneliness and despair, which we try and shut out through our addiction to staying busy and the numbing background noise of the media, the endless virtual stream bombarding us through social media, our iPhones, computers, tv, Netflix, Amazon Prime, and more.

A professor received a prestigious award and received a standing ovation. As he came to the microphone, they expected him to give the usual rendition of thanks to God, country, and the many people who had helped him and to talk about all the wonderful blessings in his life. They were shocked when he told them that over the past years he had been struggling with depression. Yet, by giving voice to what lurks in the hearts of so many of us, he created a space for others to share their stories about depression, about suffering, and to journey together with him. (sermons.com)

I am no stranger to depression and despair. There have been many difficult moments in my life. And, as painful as they were, I am so grateful for them because they allow me to be genuinely empathetic to those who are suffering. For only those who have suffered can truly understand what it means to live in darkness and without hope. I love the quote: *“In love’s army, only the wounded soldiers can serve.”* I actually consider my times of suffering to be much more important learning experiences and training ground for my ministry than my Masters and Ph.D.

Among other periods of darkness, for two years, from the ages of sixteen and seventeen, and then again in my mid-twenties, I struggled with a depression so deep I never thought it would end. I felt as though I was living in the bottom of a pit that had no ladder to climb out, not knowing whether the day would ever come when I would see the light and again feel a sense of joy, purpose, meaning, and excitement in life. Had cutting been a trend then, I might have been a cutter, to bring some momentary relief. And I was a Christian at this time. Yes, Christians can experience debilitating depression, the grounds of which can’t always be explained. And no, it is not a moral failure or a spiritual problem. I don’t think that it is a moral failure or spiritual problem, for example, that I also plunged into a period of depression more recently after the deaths of my sister-in-law Eileen and our organist Donnie from Covid. I think it was a very human reaction to a tragic occurrence. It is because I loved them so dearly that I felt the pain of their death so acutely and this took the form of depression.

Looking back I see that there were two things that most gave me hope in my darkness and helped me eventually to emerge from it and see the light and experience the joy of living again. The first was knowing that Jesus himself had suffered and stood in solidarity with me in my pain. The second were the friends who stood by and “held space” for me.

First, Jesus suffered. That Jesus was fully human is nowhere seen as vividly as in our scripture passage for today when Jesus went to a famous garden in the Bible, namely the Garden of Gethsemane, or what I call the Garden of Sorrows to anguish, bare his soul, and pray fervently to God, asking his disciples to “hold space” for him while he did the most difficult soul work of his life. How did Jesus end up there? Our scriptures say that on that Thursday night, so many years ago, after Jesus shared his last meal with his disciples in an Upper Room, they sang a hymn, and went out into the dark streets, making their way to the Mount of Olives. When Jesus told them that they all would desert him, they argued among themselves as they passed by the Lower Pool and walked through the Fountain Gate. Peter, especially, seemed almost offended by Jesus’ words, promising that he would never do so. Jesus countered that that very night he would deny him three times. Perhaps the disciples, knowing that Jesus’ life was in danger, might have encouraged him to try to slip out of Jerusalem under the cover of dark. But Jesus would not hear of that. He was determined to meet his destiny with courage.

As they entered the outskirts of the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus turned to the larger group of his disciples and asked that they “*sit here while I pray*” (vs. 32). He asked that only Peter, James, and John go further with him. “Not fair!” some of them might have said. “They were the only ones who got to go up to the mountain top with you where suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared! I know that they were the first ones you called to follow you but why were they the only ones who got to see you heal Jairus’ daughter? Take us with you too!” But Jesus gently asked the other disciples to stay behind and, accompanied by Peter, James, and John, he walked resolutely into the heart of the garden. Then the reality of what Jesus was facing began to set in. He not only had challenged the legal system of Judaism by healing on the Sabbath and reinterpreting the meaning of many of their teachings but he had also pointed out the corrupt economic practices at the Temple when he overturned the tables of the moneychangers. As he grew in popularity the Romans also may have worried that he might cause a riot. Visions of crucifixions may have flashed before him. Only 33 years old, he still had so much he wanted to accomplish, with so many more people to heal and teach, with his mother dependent on him, disciples who loved him. He was filled with fear and trepidation, becoming more and more “*distressed and agitated*” (vs. 33). He needed to be alone to bare his soul to

God. Turning to Peter, James, and John ***“he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake”*** (vs. 34).

Going on alone by himself, becoming increasingly despondent and distressed, he threw himself on the ground, asking God if there might be some way out of the dilemma he found himself in. He pleaded: ***“Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me ...”*** (vs. 36). Jesus brought all his distress, fear, pain to Abba as his very human self fought to surrender to the will of his heavenly Father. After what may have been the greatest spiritual struggle of his life, he came to a place of faith-filled acceptance saying ***“yet [Father], not what I want, but what you want”*** (vs. 36).

Yes, Jesus suffered. He anguished and cried out to God to take the cup of suffering from him. Now I know that many here don't like the crucifix, namely the cross with the crucified Jesus on it. We Protestants prefer the empty cross that represents the resurrection. We want to make that leap from the joyous expectant shouting of the crowds on Palm Sunday straight across to the resurrection of Easter Sunday, leaving out all the suffering in between: the betrayal of Jesus by his closest friends, his arrest, beatings, ridicule, unjust condemnation and, finally, his execution by crucifixion as a common criminal. But I find hope in knowing that Jesus suffered. I find hope in knowing that the suffering of Jesus had meaning and was not in vain. Yet not in terms of those who believe in the doctrine of “substitutionary atonement” or that an angry vengeful God demands a human sacrifice as payment for our sins. Rather, Jesus suffered in solidarity with all of us. When we suffer, we know that Jesus has experienced suffering far worse than ours and suffers right alongside us. The cross symbolizes that love is always stronger than death and after this life there is more life! Suffering also has the potential of transforming us into stronger, wiser, more compassionate people.

I also found hope in my darkness because there were some people who “held space” for me. I remember one day in particular when I was dangerously depressed while a graduate student at Drew University. A friend named Marcie, who herself had suffered greatly in her own life, said to me, “Ruth, let me come over and spend the night at your apartment. I'll be there if you need me.” She came over and sat quietly with me, not trying to be a Pollyanna or provide explanations for my suffering—like Job's friends did—but she just held a space within which I could feel what I was feeling, without her judgment or commentary, without her trying to fix me. Later I went to sleep. She slept on the sofa in the living room with one ear open in case I might need her. It was such a comfort to me,

just knowing she was there, bearing witness to my pain, a loving, caring presence. She “held space.” And I woke up the next day feeling significantly better.

Jesus called upon his disciples to “hold space” for him in the Garden of Gethsemane as he underwent profound soul-searching, wrestled with God, and experienced excruciating suffering. But he did not want to do so alone. At his most human and most vulnerable, he now needed his disciples to focus on him, to support him in his suffering, to create a sacred space within which he would be held as he underwent what probably were the most difficult hours of his life. Right at the beginning of our scripture today it states that Jesus said to his disciples: “*Sit here while I pray*” (vs. 32). They were to form an outer circle—with their bodies, minds, hearts, and souls—to support him in his suffering, to hold a sacred space within which he would be held. The scriptures say that he had an additional task for his three closest disciples Peter, James, and John: “*He said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake*” (vs. 33). They were to create an inner circle and be very intentional in being there for him if he needed their help. They were to stay alert, awake, focus on him, bear witness to his anguish, pray for him with intensity, energetically surround him. They were to “hold space.” Jesus asked them to simply sit near him while he did the deep inner work he needed to do, and to stay awake. Unfortunately, they failed in this task, falling asleep three times. When they woke up it was just in time to witness Jesus being arrested, leading to his crucifixion the very next day.

Holding space is what we do when we are present to a person who is undergoing a difficulty, holding them in our hearts, praying for them, and letting them know that they and their struggles matter to us and that we will bear witness to their journey without actually intruding on it. Here are three recommendations on how to engage in the spiritual practice of “holding space”:

The first is that you open your heart and hold that person in God’s light as you give your complete, undivided attention to the person or situation. Your attention and energy go out to that person or people as you envision them as God’s beloved children. When you do this you create a kind of energetic space or container. Heather Plett, co-founder of the *Centre for Holding Space* (<https://centreforholdingspace.com/>) talks about this as “holding the rim” for people. Plett says that the circle becomes the space within which people feel safe enough to allow complex emotions to surface that normally might be hidden: their fears, shame, trauma, anxieties, concerns, anger, apprehensions, sorrows. You need to contain your ego and keep your emotions in check by not allowing them to

spill over into that space. (<http://heatherplett.com/2015/03/hold-space>) For example, if you start to cry when they are crying, then it becomes about you too, and they may feel like they need to comfort you. They should not have to manage your emotions or listen to your experiences related to theirs. Your job is merely to hold space by being present, opening your heart, and holding that person in God's light. Jesus said to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, "***Sit here, while I pray ... keep awake***" (vs. 32, 34). In other words, Jesus said, sit here and be a supportive presence while I do the most difficult and most sacred spiritual and emotional work that I need to do. Create a sacred space for me to do the most difficult work of my life. Hold the rim. And stay awake!

Second, you hold space by letting go of all judgment and shame. We are called to walk alongside another person in whatever journey they're on without judging them, making them feel inadequate or ashamed, or trying to fix them. Jean Vanier, whose words sustained me during my depression when I was in my late teens and early twenties, wrote: "*the person in misery does not need a look that judges and criticizes but a comforting presence that brings peace and hope and life and says: 'you are a human person, important, mysterious, infinitely precious. What you have to say is important because it flows from a human person. In you there are those seeds of the infinite, those germs of love ... of beauty which must rise from the earth of your misery so humanity be fulfilled. If you do not rise then something will be missing. You must rise again on the third day. ... rise again because we all need you, for you are a child of God'.*" (*Tears of Silence*, p. 28) When we withhold judgment and shame, we offer others the opportunity to reach deep inside themselves to find the courage to take risks and the resilience to keep persevering. If they have made mistakes, we reassure them that failure is simply a part of the journey for all of us and not the end of the world.

Third, you allow another person to have whatever experience they're having. As Kate Washington wrote in her article entitled "How to actually help an overwhelmed caregiver" in the latest edition of *Time*:

"So what does help when a friend or family member is in the thick of caregiving, or any crisis? First, offer space for the full range of their emotions, on their terms. There's immense power in a simple text telling a friend you're there for them, particularly if you add this magic phrase at the end: 'No need to respond.' ... I appreciated friends who explicitly took the pressure off. I knew they saw and could handle my real experience: often harried, sometimes far from positive." (*Time* March 29 / April 5, 2021, p. 32).

When we hold space, we allow people to do their own work. While it is natural for us to want to give advice or rush to fix things to alleviate our own anxiety, we need to allow people to grapple with life on their own terms. We need to give people permission to trust their own intuition and wisdom, knowing that when they allow themselves to fully experience and express what's happening, deeper healing is already at work and they will find their own answers.

Jesus asked his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane to hold space for him as he said: ***“Sit here while I pray. ... keep awake”*** (vs. 32, 34). Our individual Christian calling is to “hold space” for people. Sometimes, like the larger group of the disciples, we are asked to stay on the perimeter and create an outer circle. Other times, like Peter, James, and John, we are privileged to hold space as part of an inner circle. As a church we also are called to “hold space.” You will remember that before a person goes into the waters of baptism I ask the congregation to prayerfully sing a song to create a sacred space for that person to be baptized. It's a physical space because we are present with our bodies. But more than anything it is a spiritual space as we are energetically opening up our hearts as we hold that person in God's light, wanting only the best for them, sending them love, lifting them up in prayer.

As church, we are called to “hold space” in many other ways as well. We “hold space” each Sunday as log onto zoom or as we return to our sanctuary this Sunday after a year without in-person worship, seeking to be a welcoming presence for each and every person we encounter: as we invoke God's presence, leave aside pettiness, and, as we withhold judgment, we allow people to bring with them all of their joys and concerns, their shame, their suffering, their anxieties, insecurities, and fears. We allow each person to be, in the words of the hymn, *“Just As I Am, Without One Plea.”* We “hold space” as we reach out to the sick, shut ins, those who are grieving and hurting. We “hold space” for the families of those who are facing difficulties and uncertainties. We “hold space” as we fellowship together and as we study together. The women and men and youth “hold space” during their fellowship groups. We especially are called to “hold space” for our children whose lives have been disrupted during this pandemic, perhaps recalling the beautiful words of Jean Vanier in his book *“Tears of Silence,”* which go:

How then to approach the miserable child

not haughtily

but humbly

not judging but loving

determined not to dominate

*not even to give things
rather to give myself
my time
energy
and heart
and to listen
believing that he is important
a child of God
in whom Jesus lives
approach with tenderness
gently
gently giving one's friendship
delicate soothing hands
bearing the oil of mercy
annointing deep wounds. ...
[for] he who is
or has been
deeply hurt
has a **RIGHT**
to be sure
he is*

LOVED. (Jean Vanier, *Tears of Silence*, p. 34,36)

We “hold space” when we don’t go through the routine of simply asking someone how they are without really being ready for an honest reply.

We “hold space” as we make time for and pray for one another.

We “hold space” as we remember that Christ has no body on earth but ours.

Closing Prayer: Loving God, we thank you that you hold space for us, as we remember, with the Apostle Paul who wrote to the church in Rome, that ***“I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** (Romans 8:38-39). In the name of Jesus, who suffered and still suffers in solidarity with us, and who is the ultimate space holder we can always rely on. Amen.