

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, March 20, 2022

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## Mark 14:32-42

So, as I said, we'll continue in this series that we've entitled Good Grief: Navigating Loss Together this day. Just an acknowledgment on this third week of Lent, that this work, this grief work, is really difficult work, okay? So if you leave here feeling heavy, if you're processing throughout the week, you need to know that that is completely normal. It is normal for us to have to work really hard in this time. It's actually...it's work, this thing that we call grieving; and we, together, we're learning a new vocabulary. Together we're learning different ways to name emotions that we have. And so I just want us to hear this weekly reminder that grief for us, we understand, is not a linear process. It is fluid. Grief moves more like a tide than a train. As we were reminded this day as we began our time of worship, the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes. So my hope for us is throughout the season of Lent the Lord might gift us with new eyes to see the grief that we are navigating. Our second lesson this morning comes from the New Testament, the Gospel of Mark, the 14th chapter, verses 32 through 42. Let us listen together for God's word.

They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. He 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. Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So of all the stages, it strikes me that bargaining might be the most desperate. It might be the most desperate of the stages played out in public view perhaps more than others.

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We get used to bargaining pretty early in life. We barter with our parents or even our siblings if they'll listen to us. We make promises and bargain with God even, early on.

Bargaining is a way for us to claim some type of power with questions like "What if?" Bargaining at its root is a way for us in the midst of grief to claim some type of control. Because it turns out that for us humans when pain and loss are involved, we want a plan. I sat down with Angela Kelly before this sermon series began, and that was one of the things that she reiterated to me. She said, "When we are experiencing grief and pain and loss, we need a plan. It's part of what our heart and mind wants, because our mind in grief is wrestling with the truth. It is trying to let go of one reality and make room for another."

And so in this most desperate of stages, we meet Jesus in this garden on this dark night, and we get what perhaps is one of the most vulnerable scenes in all of scripture from Jesus. Mark actually tells it more purposefully than some of the other gospels, but what we have is Jesus in anguish and anxiety; and he needs to go off and pray in a place that he probably knows pretty well, actually. He needs to take a couple of friends with him. That's...that's important to him, so Peter and James and John, they come along; they come all the way to the garden. He leaves them and he goes just a few steps past, and he falls to his knees in anxiety, falls to his knees in grief. Jesus is wrestling with the reality of what he knows is to come.

It strikes me in this particular scene--we'll get to the disciples falling asleep, we'll get to Peter and James and John not staying awake--but at least at the beginning, there's a lesson for us in how we accompany people in grief. You just need to walk with people. You actually don't need to say anything. Sometimes people just need you to be adjacent to their pain and their grief. They don't need you to call them every day, text them every day, show up at their house all the time. They just need to know that you're there. That's what Jesus seemed to need on that night. He didn't need his friends there when he fell to his knees and prayed, "Abba, Father," but he did need them real close by. I think that's an important lesson for us. He takes his friends, leaves them just a few steps behind, falls to his knees, and he prays that if it is possible he might be spared the time of suffering. Mark says that Jesus said this prayer, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible. Take this cup of suffering away from me. However, not what I want but what you want; not my will but yours." Other translations would describe it. Three times he prays this prayer, scripture says; three times he takes this petition before God, this attempt at negotiation. Turns out Abraham is a good forerunner for us going back and forth with God. "Will you clear the city if there are 50 innocent people? No? How about 45? I'll hold off 40, 25, 10?"

When the early church fathers give this example of what it looks like to go back and forth to negotiate, to bargain with God (and Jesus does it three times), I get to the end of that Genesis text, and I think God must have been losing patience; but here in this garden, God listens attentively to God's son.

"If you can take this cup of suffering away from me, please. But not my will, your will; not what I want, what you want."

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Our bargaining doesn't necessarily look like this bargaining of Jesus in a dark garden, but it can feel that way. It can feel like we've come right up to suffering. We've had a couple of friends come along with us if we're lucky, and then we fall to our knees. We say, "If this doesn't have to happen, take it away. If I don't have to feel this pain of this loss, remove it." Perhaps we asked three times or 300 times on our journeys of grief. Our bargaining looks a little different. It often is exemplified by two simple questions. What if? And if only. We have bargaining that asks the what-if question in all sorts of different parts of our lives, the what ifs of a marriage that has ended in divorce. What if...what if we had gone to counseling earlier? What if I'd spoken more clearly my needs earlier? What if I hadn't put up with that behavior earlier?

Or when we lose a loved one—

What if I would have gotten them into a better facility? What if I would have advocated for them more in the hospital? What if I would have put my foot down earlier and said, "You're going to the doctor; you're not feeling normal."

Or the if onlys of parenting--

If only we had stepped in sooner, chosen a different activity or a school.

If only we had taken that...that car away from them earlier.

If only we hadn't given in.

The if onlys, the what ifs are excruciating.

But they are the bargaining that we do. If I had done this, maybe the cup would have been taken away. What if I had done this, and the cup would have been taken away? We imagine in our pain that we even still have some control there.

About a year ago from this pulpit, I told the story of my sister. She passed three years ago-- complications related to eating disorders and alcoholism. If you've walked with someone who's navigated addiction, then you know that is a difficult road to walk. If they've invited you to be their companion to the garden on a dark night of their soul, then you know how taxing it can be. Maybe you've even fallen asleep. If you've walked that road with somebody, then you know what it's like to bargain, bargain with them, and bargain with God.

I had been ordained as a minister of the word and sacrament for a month when I got a call from the consulate in Cancun.

I answered the call. It was a friend of my sister's. They had left a few days earlier to enjoy a beach vacation, something had happened, and the confidant was there to tell me through the voice of my friend that my sister was in a hospital in ICU. She had been intubated and was non-responsive. Now I was only a month into ordained ministry, didn't have any extra money in my bank account. My dad wasn't able to fly or to leave the country, so I had to get a plane ticket, cash in my miles and hop a plane to Cancun. I was going to be for her her next of kin--whatever that was going to mean. All I knew is that she had been rushed to the hospital earlier that day and

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was not responding to care, so I boarded a flight in Atlanta, and I took off to cross the Gulf of Mexico--down across southern Georgia, then across the Gulf of Mexico, down to Cancun.

I had one of the worst seats in the plane. I was all the way in the back.

I leaned my head against the window. I'm an aisle sitter, but it was the only seat left so I leaned my head against the window and watched as the sun began to set, and I started bargaining with God.

God, if you will just bring her back from this particular situation, I don't know what's going on. If you'll just pull her off of that ventilator, we're going to get her help. We're going to make sure that she goes to that intensive inpatient that she hasn't wanted to go to, that we haven't been able to push her to. We're going to make sure that happens.

And then the if onlys--if only I had talked to her 10 years ago when she got drunk at the Christmas party.

If only I had paid attention when she shuffled her food around on her plate and said something.

The what ifs and the if onlys are excruciating when we are bargaining with God. I leaned my head against the window of that plane and I just started crying, and the sun started to set. And if you watched the sun last night set over the river, and you saw it turn orange and purple, it was gorgeous.

And God did this thing. It was actually physics and...and God all at the same time, right? The entire length of the ride, the sunset, the speed of the plane, and the speed of the earth's rotation synced up, and so I got an hour-long sunset and a rainbow makes its way across the sky as we're getting close to Cancun. All I can feel as I'm crying is the sense that I do not know what's going to happen, but I do know that God is present there; and I land and I go to the hospital.

Ultimately, she would come off of that that breathing apparatus. I would be her companion as she flew back to the States.

The trouble with bargaining is that while we try to have power, we can't avoid the pain.

That's the hard part about grief and about this stage in particular. When we try to claim power, which is a very normal human thing for us to do, the truth and the reality is that we cannot avoid the suffering. When we are grieving loss, when we are grieving death, we have to at some point come to grips with that pain.

If we are looking for the good news amongst this stage of bargaining, then we have to first acknowledge this difficult truth--that as the people of God, even as the people of God, we can't avoid hurt. We can't avoid pain. Those are the difficult truths. Here's the Gospel truth. Jesus

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knows our hurt. Jesus knows our pain. Maybe even particularly in this stage of bargaining, Jesus knows our grief.

And that means that we're not alone in wanting to avoid the pain, but it also means that we're not alone in experiencing that pain.

Your inability to avoid the pain of loss doesn't mean that God isn't present with you. Even more than that, in this season of Lent we have 40 days to remind ourselves that God is fully present in pain and in loss. On teary plain rides and on drives across the state to meet loved ones, God is in the midst and present in our pain and in our loss. The Gospel truth is expressed beautifully by Kate Bowler. She puts it this way, "As Christians we choose to love a God who dies.

Admittedly it's a peculiar bit of good news, it's a peculiar choice on our part, but it's good news because it means that we worship God, who willingly joins us in our loss. Like Jesus we need people to accompany us on our journey of grief. We need people to sit close by and keep vigil for us. In this Lenten season part of our job actually is to link arms with people that we love and stare down the abyss of grief together, to take flight or to sit beside, to be companions even as our loved ones, even as we bargain with the divine."

Kate Bowler is one of my favorite authors. I commend all of her work to you. She has one particular work, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I Loved*. It's a beautiful indictment of easy answers from the church.

She wrote a blessing in the beginning of the season of Lent, a blessing for when you mourn what could have been, when you ask what if, or you start a sentence with if only.

"Blessed are you, friend, sitting among the shards of what could have been. It is broken now that dream you loved, and it has spilled out all over the ground. Blessed are you, dear one, letting your eyes look around and remember all the hope your dream once contained, all the love, all the beauty.

Blessed are you telling your tears that they can flow, telling your anger that it can speak. Blessed are you when mourning is the holy work of the moment, for it speaks of what is real. Blessed are you letting this loss speak all its terrible truth to your soul.

Blessed are we who mourn saying, 'Let us remain in grief's cold winter for as long as it takes, that morning might be to our hearts the gentlest springtime.'"

When I think about where we're situated in this season, when I think about what it looks like for us to bargain with the divine, I'm reassured that we worship a God, who, late one evening, grabbed a couple friends in the midst of his anguish and his anxiety, his anger and his grief. He went to a garden, and he brought his petitions before his God.

Perhaps we can do nothing else in this season of Lent as we navigate our own grief than to do the same, to grab a companion or two or three, even if they're tired, and ask them to come along with us and bring before God and bear before God our true self.

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It's my hope for each of us and for our church in this season. I pray that it might be so.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.