



Call Me at Midnight

Sermon Series: Better Together: 40 Days of Community

Sunday, September 23, 2007
Being There for Each Other

Rev. Dr. David E. Gilbert
Scripture Lesson: Matthew 26:36-40

**"I am deeply grieved, even to death;
remain here, and stay awake with me."
-Matthew 26:38 [NRSV]**

A good friend and family neighbor up where we lived in Grand Rapids – Gregg Keeler – is a first sergeant in the U.S. Marines. Gregg has been with the Marines for quite a while, risen through the ranks, and seen his tours of duty. He's served two tours of duty in Iraq and will probably be serving a third one before the year is out. Part of Gregg's responsibilities as first sergeant with his unit is

a most unhappy one. He's the one who has to notify the family when their son or daughter is killed or wounded in action. Gregg has had to make four or five "death calls" this last year. He hates this part of his work, as you can imagine. As it happens, most of his calls on families have taken place at night. It is a wrenching experience for the family called

on, and it a most difficult experience also for Gregg.

Is there anything as unsettling as a ringing phone or a ringing doorbell waking you up in the middle of the night? Sometimes we mask our fear with irritation. *Who is calling at this hour of the night?* But just beneath the surface of our minds flash unthinkable scenarios as we pray, "Dear God, don't let it be this, don't let it be that."

Our Lord had this unthinkable scenario one night in a place called Gethsemane. In that desperate moment he called his friends at midnight and he called and he called and they would not wake up.

What's so cruelly ironic is that just an hour before Jesus had been at table with them and had lifted a glass and said, "This is the new covenant in my blood. This is my commitment to you – in my blood. I'll be there for you throughout time and eternity."

But Gethsemane shows us how hard it is to follow through on our commitments and how difficult they can be to keep. An hour later Jesus wrestles tremendously with how much this covenant is going to cost. Gethsemane might be the most wrenching/touching scene in the Gospels, for it gives us an amazing glimpse of our Lord's

humanity, his inner struggles. Our text is Matthew 26:36-40.

36 Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' ³⁷*He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated.* ³⁸*Then he said to them, 'I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.'* ³⁹*And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.'* ⁴⁰*Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, 'So, could you not stay awake with me one hour?' ⁴¹Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.'* ⁴²*Again he went away for the second time and prayed, 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.'* ⁴³*Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy.* ⁴⁴*So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words.* ⁴⁵*Then he came to the disciples and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.* ⁴⁶*Get up,*

let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.'

Up until this moment Jesus has been strong and in control of every situation. We have seen him verbally chastise his disciples for not getting into their heads what he's been trying to tell them. We have marveled at the way he can think on his feet spinning out magnificent stories at the drop of a hat in response to some random question from the crowd. He's taken our breath away with the compelling pictures he paints of God and heaven and the kingdom. It was other people who had problems and those problems they would bring to Jesus.

But now Jesus is the one with the problem – and then some! He is troubled. Deeply, profoundly troubled! Later his disciples would recall how he became so agitated that sweat poured through his clothing and onto the ground. The word Gethsemane in Hebrew means "the olive press." How symbolic of the crushing pressure Jesus feels under the terrible weight of all he is about to endure, so his very soul oozes tears and prayers.

Imagine within an hour of elevating the chalice and saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood," we hear him say, "Father, take this cup from me."

One's "cup" in the Bible was a person's fate prepared by God. Here in all his humanity Jesus is wrestling/struggling/agonizing over how bitter and poisonous was the cup he was about to drink. He wants there to be another way – a Plan B – and so he prays, "Father, take this cup from me."

Does that bother you?
Do you think less of him?

Jesus didn't come into the world as God's robot. Jesus was not doped up on divine steroids so life was easier for him than it is for us.

Jesus fully felt the awful cost of fulfilling his commitment to us. How much he wanted his friends – Peter, James and John -- to be in prayer with him. Hear him reaching out, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he says. "Stay here and keep watch with me." "Watch and pray," with me for, "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak," he cries the second time. "He left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing." But each time, when Jesus returns, he finds his friends asleep and himself alone.

Now, I don't think we should be too hard on Peter and James and John. Why? Because they sensed their world was falling

apart, that it was coming apart at the seams. And when our world seems like it's falling apart, coming apart at the seams, don't we sometimes feel like curling up with a soft pillow? Don't we feel like saying, "Wake me up when it's over"?

Someone has said the metaphor of our time is hibernation. With all the problems of the world – the enormity of the problems – things like the AIDS crisis in Africa – and all the problems/crises closer to home – it can all seem so overwhelming – such that we want to take a nap, a long sleep, until it's all over and the problems are solved.

Hibernating, cocooning – whatever we want to call it – withdrawing from the problems of the world and retreating with family into our idyllic dream world with all the good things of life inside our own little cave, that's how we sleep through Gethsemane. But in the middle of the night don't you ever hear your 3 a.m. voice ask, "Is this all there is? Isn't there more to life than this?" It's the very nudge of Jesus saying, "Wake up. Wake up." "Wake up to the call to be my disciple. Wake up to bring my healing love to a broken world. Won't you share my heart for one hour?" Don't go to sleep, go to prayer. Pray that amidst the chaotic events that will soon engulf you, that

you will stay focused and faithful and not just scatter like sheep without a shepherd.

But, of course, the disciples did sleep and then scattered to the hills. And yet, they never got over how Jesus, their Lord and Master, stayed the course and went to the cross and paid the awful price of fulfilling his commitment to them. Their lives were reshaped by the reality that while they had failed him, he would never fail them. He had promised, "I will be with you always, even when you call me at midnight, even when the cost is a cross."

Friends, can we make that kind of covenant as Jesus' followers within our families, within our friendships, and within our church?

Can we be one of those "call me at midnight and I'll put on the coffee" kind of friends?

How far down that road of *being there for people* do we go?

A fellow Presbyterian pastor got a frantic call one day from a family in his church. The dad had been arrested for sexually abusing children in their neighborhood. A decade later this man is still in prison. The day of that call my friend drove to their neighborhood, turned the corner and there before him he saw the entire street

jammed with news camera crews and reporters all focused on the family's house. He thought, "If I get out of this car and walk up to this house, guess who is going to be all over the six o'clock news? And guess which congregation is going to be dragged through the public disgrace of having an alleged child predator as one of its, until now, respected members?"

If there was ever a moment to ask what Jesus would do, my friend said, this was it. He said a prayer, got out of the car and walked up to the door and, yes, it was shown on all the networks at six and eleven o'clock that night. But the family will never forget that visit for helping them to realize that God had not abandoned them and neither had their church family.¹

Our crucified Lord took upon himself all of our shame and guilt and stigma of all our failures. So that no matter how low we sink, there is always, always a way back.

Our faith hinges on the fact that in Gethsemane Jesus could have walked. He did not have to go through with the cross. As the great Catholic theologian Raymond Brown says, "Had Jesus died peacefully of old age in his sleep or collapsed of a heart attack while walking along the Sea of Galilee with his

disciples we'd have a very different word to speak to the world. Without the cross, we could still have Jesus' teachings. But we wouldn't have had the gospel." Out of love Jesus chose to die for you and me.

This midnight Savior calls us to be midnight people who are awake for each other no matter what.....24/7.

In my last church there was a young woman named Patti Dodgson. Patti was born with a variety of congenital defects and she is unable to walk. Over the span of her 30-some years she has had over 40 surgeries. She is an amazing testimony to persistence and perseverance. A few years back Patti had to have another surgery and about the same time her mother, whom she was very close to, died.

There is a woman in the church, Jan Spriggs, who has worked with Patti as a Stephen Minister. Jan is in her late 70's, and she went daily to visit Patti in the hospital, comforting her in her grief and encouraging her through a time of recovery. I think she may have even handled some personal and business/financial affairs for Patti as well. This went on for weeks.

I was talking with Jan one day and she looked rather tired. I couldn't help myself and I

blurted out, "Jan, you're amazing."

I'll never forget what she said, "Dave, get off it. I'm nothing more than a Christian friend."

Every time we keep a commitment with each other, we deepen our communion with the God who makes and keeps his covenant with us. He says to us this morning, "I'll never leave you nor forsake you. Call me at midnight and I'll be there."²

And he wants us also to be there for each other.

A Poland member introduced herself to me one Sunday this summer shortly after I'd arrived here. We were outside the front door of the church and she said, "If all I did was yell help, there'd be an instant traffic jam on my street with all my Poland Presbyterian friends."

I thought that was just wonderful! – It speaks volumes.

Call us at midnight.
We will be there.

Join with me in prayer:

Lord, strengthen us this morning. Strengthen us for the commitments that you call us to. Let us take your covenant and then mirror that unconditional, loving, suffering

covenant as we put our arms around the people you give us in our lives. Thank you, Lord, for draining that cup of suffering so that we can be with you this day. In your saving name we pray. Amen.

¹ Thanks to Vic Pentz

² Thanks to Dan Meyer