

Apprehending Prayer

Mark 14.32 – 42; Luke 22. 39-46; John 18.1-11

A Sermon Preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church

Rev. Dr. Bill Crawford

March 20, 2011

There are beautiful flowering cherry trees in the garden, here at the Larchmont Avenue Church, just beyond this sanctuary's south wall. All but one of the trees came to us, as small plants, years ago from Japan. They were brought as a gift from a woman whose father was a U.S. State Department official stationed there. The other tree is from the Yamaguchi family.

As springtime is beginning, those blossoms are emerging, slightly. Between Friday's warmth and this morning's chill, their debut has been slowed down. I was hoping for a dramatic arrival of the blossoms to coincide with this sermon . . . but they'll come. [Keep your eye on them. You might say: "Why travel to Washington, we have our own cherry blossom festival here on the corner of Larchmont and Forest Park?"]

The delicate loveliness of those trees, and their budding soon-to-be-flowers, came from that land whose beauty – in recent days -- has been decimated. We have seen the pictures, of the tsunami waves crashing and rushing, plowing through and pulverizing the villages along Japan's coast, all in the devastating moments following the 8.9 magnitude earthquake.

Those cherry trees here are identical to their cousins in Japan. And the emerging of their blossoms is happening here, as well as there, at the very same time.

The calm and the beauty of the flowering cherry trees stand in distinct contrast to nature's rage and ruin.

Likewise, the scene at the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus is at prayer, is a setting of calm and beauty. At first, it is clearly a different picture from what erupts in storm-like fashion in that lovely spot in just a matter of moments.

Here at LAC, as we have embarked into this season of Lent, in our journey in worship, we are marking Jesus' last week and the passion of Christ.

And as "passion" traditionally means "suffering," we are looking also at Jesus as *passionate-- passionate for, loving of . . . the people*. Along the steps he takes – beginning with his Sunday arrival in Jerusalem during upon the time of Passover -- those steps and scenarios in the journey are filled with encounters that reveal and reflect our humanity and human ways, in the face of what Jesus would do, and did, with love poured out.

There at Gethsemane, in the garden, he prays. His prayer is impassioned.

John's Gospel takes a longer view of the moments that day, Thursday. Proceeding the time in the garden; John especially notes the prayers of Jesus which come prior.

Early in the evening, Jesus invoked the new Passover in the cup and the breaking of the bread – “My body for you.” And he prayed before the meal that God, the Father will protect them, and that they may be one. He prayed passionately that “the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

With that, John writes, “he went out” -- leaving the place where they had supper, in the city. Seeking a place of solitude, he goes across the Kidron Valley, really a short distance from the dwellings of Jerusalem (I walked that stretch myself years ago in Jerusalem) to the foot of the Mt. Olives – to a garden there. Really a beautiful place.

I remember the trees in particular, in a thick grove, with aging, gnarly trunks with strong, wide-spreading limbs and lush leaves. I remember, too, in the peaceful beauty of that space – it was daylight, but shadows were falling – hearing the distinct sound of sirens of police vehicles that sped by, on the street just adjacent to the garden. It left me thinking of that night . . .

Jesus has gone to there to pray. He asked the disciples to stay awake, but they fall off to sleep. The authorities come for Jesus. It appears to be a crowd who's better equipped to break up an armed riot, rather than to arrest a lone man who will offer them no resistance. They were soldiers and others who would have been in the hire of the religious leaders. Judas, was among them; he identifies Jesus as the one they've come to apprehend and arrest.

The disciples are stirred from their sleep. Peter has a sword – surprisingly, a disciple with a sword! Peter strikes one of them – a slave of the high priest, named Malcus, cutting off his ear. Jesus rebukes Peter – to “put the sword away. Whoever, lives by the sword, dies by the sword (Mt. 26.52)!”

Jesus immediately heals the man's ear: an act which is Jesus' last earthly miracle – to one who has no allegiance or stature or whose belief has any bearing on receiving this love.

So it is: the love of Christ has no bounds or strictures, it's not confined to those who claim Christ, or conditional upon creed or doctrine, nation or origin.

In the events and steps to come, as Jesus is taken away . . . and ahead is the Cross, and then the empty tomb. And we will travel that course.

In the shadows of the moment -- peaceful and still, but with the sense in the air that something is “*about*,” ominous, looming ahead, Jesus prays – for the followers and that the cup before him would pass by, “yet, not my will but yours be done.”

And in the prayer of Jesus, we are called . . . to pray, and to realize we are being prayed for.

To pray; not knowing what it is before us, even the trials and tests, but realizing God's presence, lifting us up, restoring us to life, now and always.

May it be so. Amen.