

MAUNDY THURSDAY

THURSDAY, MARCH 24, 2016

EXODUS 12:1-4, 11-14; MARK 14:22-42

1ST LUTHERAN, MARSHALL

PASTOR SCOTT FULLER

Friend of Sinners

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

In all my years of preaching on Maundy Thursday, I have always focused on the ***Last Supper*** as the framework for my sermon:

- some of the **words** that Jesus **speaks**,
 - what **communion** means *for us*,
 - who** was **invited** to share in his last meal before dying –
- the passage presents a **host** of themes to choose from.

But never **once** have I preached on the **rest** of the story, what happens **after** the Last Supper, the account of **Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane**. And I only **realized** this just recently when two unrelated things came together. A conversation with my wife and a Facebook post created a connection that sent my thoughts off in a **different** direction.

Carolyn was telling me about a program she'd heard on National Public Radio.



The title sounds innocent enough: **Midlife Friendship Key to a Longer, Healthier Life**. In fact, it almost sounds like it could be a little boring, right? I told you, it's NPR!

Well, that whole **boredom** thing flew right out the window when Carolyn got to the meat of the story. Author and reporter Barbara Bradley Hagerty participated in an experiment about the benefits of **friendship** at the University of Virginia's neuroscience laboratory.

In a nutshell, the test subject's brain activity was monitored while the subject received *electric shocks* – both while she was **alone** *and* while she was holding the **hand** of a **good friend**. She'd been **told** that when she saw a *red X* on the screen, it meant that she might receive a **shock** in the next few seconds. *It's no big deal*, said the project manager, kind of like getting a jolt from static electricity.

Here's how **Hagerty** vocally described her experience: *You can't hear the zap of the electric shock because my recorder can't be near the brain scanner. But trust me, it hurts a lot. And after the **first** jolt, I feel a sort of **panicked dread** every time I see the warning that it might happen **again**. I am **hugely** relieved when the experiment ends.*

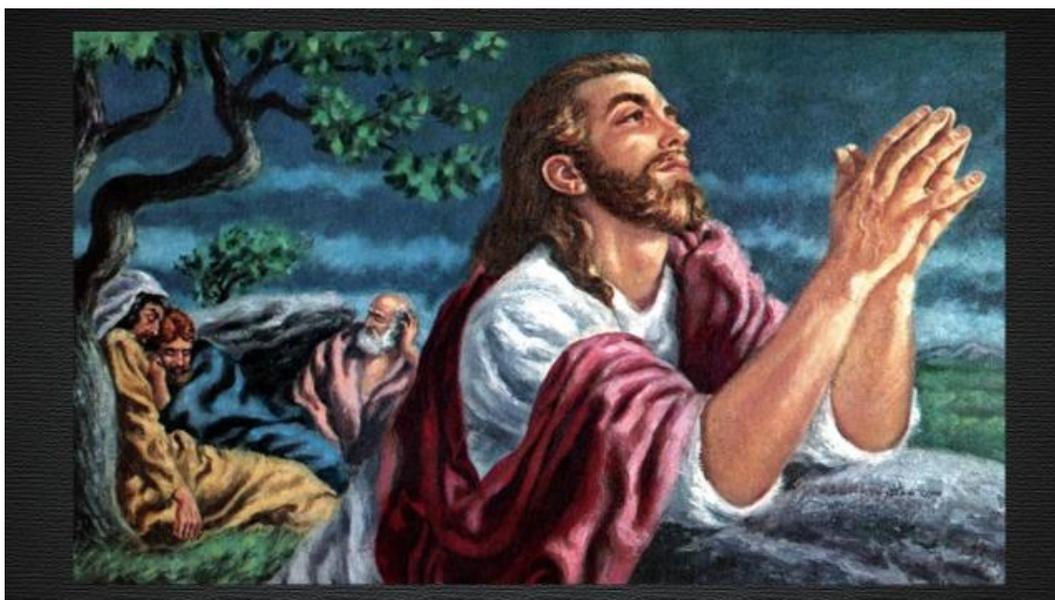


Says the professor in charge of the experiment, *When a test subject is **alone** or holding a **stranger's** hand as she anticipates the shock, the regions of the brain that process **danger** “light up like a Christmas tree.” But when holding the hand of a **trusted person**, the brain grows quiet.*

Hagerty concludes by saying, *The scans showed that when I faced the threat of an electric shock to my ankle, my brain lit up in **fearful** reaction, **except** when I **held hands** with my **friend**.*

-<http://www.npr.org/2016/03/16/470635733/midlife-friendship-key-to-a-longer-healthier-life>

So back now to the Garden of Gethsemane...



I don't think I've ever fully appreciated this story of Jesus praying in the garden. Says the Bible: *He took with him Peter, James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. And he said to them,*

*I am **deeply grieved**, even to **death**, stay here and **keep awake**.* I don't mean to sound callous, but we hear the same story every year at this time, and, well, he is the Lord, this is what he's called to do...

But then I thought of that woman whose fear was only calmed by the close presence of a good friend...and that made me think of Jesus' experience in a whole new way.

Make no mistake, the disciples are Jesus' friends, and these three, Peter, James and John are his **BFF's** – best friends forever. Says the Lord to his followers in John's Gospel, ¹⁵ *I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you **friends**...*

Jesus is **hurting**, he's **scared**, he's **fearful** of what's to come, and he's asked his closest friends to stay awake with him, to **spiritually hold his hand** as he struggles knowing what will come...

Three times he goes alone into that darkness – certainly it's dark because it's **nighttime**, but he's **also** facing the darkness of that **valley** of the **shadow** of **death** – *and*...he has to do it **alone**... Jesus calls the disciples friends...but they can't be a friend for him...

A problem shared is a problem halved - That's the first part of my realization about Maundy Thursday – how friendship helps us – and blesses us to help others...even though the disciples couldn't be that good friend to Jesus.

And I mean the kind of friend that will sit with you when you're in pain, that will stand beside you when you're being challenged, that will stay awake with you during those sleepless nights of struggle and fear...

So the second part of my awakening here has to do with the intense **loneliness** of **Jesus** as he walks that dark road to the cross... *by himself* (betrayed by one friend, denied by another, and abandoned by all the others).

This pathos of this incredibly human moment of Jesus' life was encapsulated in a facebook posting on this passage from Frederick Buechner, one of my favorite theologians in the world.

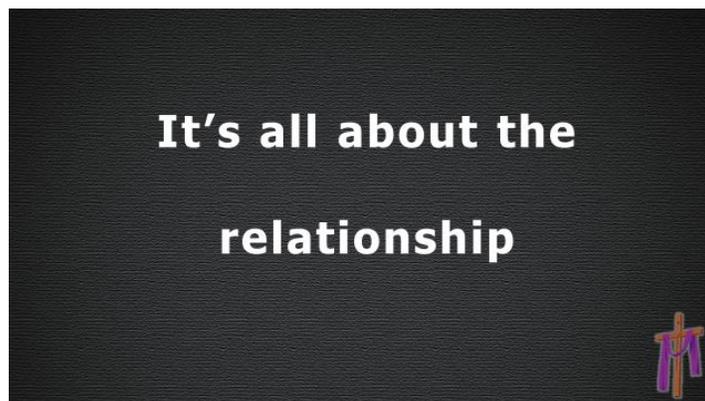
<https://www.facebook.com/Frederick.Buechner.Center/?fref=nf>

He writes...

*Jesus tells his followers, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death," and then asks the disciples to stay and watch for him while he goes off to pray. One thinks of the **stirring** and **noble** way that **others** have met **their** deaths—the **equanimity** of Socrates as he raised the (cup of **poison**) to his lips, the **exaltation** of Joan (of Arc) as they bound **her** to the **stake**... or **Nathan Hale's** (stirring exclamation) "I only regret that I have but **one** life to lose for my country." **Jesus** sounds like **none of them**, says Buechner.*

The theologian continues, (*Jesus'*) *prayer is, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will but what thou wilt" ... this **tormented** muddle of a prayer which Luke says made him sweat until it "became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground." He went **back** to find some **solace** in the **company** of his **friends** then, but he found them all asleep when he got there. "The spirit indeed is willing," said Jesus, "but the flesh is weak" ...*

One of the foundational assertions of the faith-based organizing ministry we were part of in Anchorage is the simple quote: ***It's all about the relationship.***



This means that **everything we do** should be about **building** each other **up, helping** each other **out, supporting** one another – **especially** when times are **tough**, energy is **low** and fear is **high**.

That's what **Jesus** sought to teach his **disciples**, right? – that though it's **always** our tendency to **divide** people into *us* verses *them*, **that is not God's way**.

Think of the **rules** that the Lord constantly **broke**:

- to heal people who were hurting,
- to aid people who'd been abandoned,
- to save the souls of those who had been sentenced to hell for any number of reasons.

Over and over again, Jesus demonstrated what his title meant:
Emmanuel, *God **with** us, God **for** us...*

It ***is*** all about the relationship – the relationship that ***we*** could never give to ***Jesus***, is the relationship that ***he*** now gives to ***us***. And I can't think of a better **description** of that relationship than what is said in Revelation, chapter 21. John tells us,

³ *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,
“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will **dwelt** with them;
they will be his peoples,
and **God himself** will be with them;
⁴ he will **wipe** every **tear** from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”*

⁵ *And the one who was seated on the throne said,
“See, I am making all things new.”*

Everything we think, do or say should be about that relationship.

Amen.