

March 8 – Third Sunday in Lent

Sleeping through Importance or Failing to be There

Mark 14:32-42

We know the story of the unfortunate nap the disciples took in the garden. Jesus asks them specifically to stay awake and pray and instead they fall asleep. In one sense we can hardly blame them. They had just come from a huge dinner and we know what a full stomach does to our ability to stay awake. Images of napping on the couch following Thanksgiving dinner come to mind. Jesus' agony was not their own. Jesus felt the ropes of political intrigue tightening around him and felt his arrest and likely death was coming all too soon. The disciples who had seen so many miracles could not get their minds around the thought that Jesus could be so vulnerable. So even though they were asked twice to stay awake, they couldn't and their sleeping through something important is a common sin that we all have committed.

The writer of our study talks about the ministry of presence so she says that the other term for this sin is "failing to be there." As I read this chapter I couldn't help but think back over my life and see the times I had failed to be present with someone in their time of need. I realized that it would be easy for this common sin to leave us with guilt and nothing else. I didn't know what to do with these feelings. Remembering other times where I had been awake and I had been present didn't ease the guilt.

We all have these feelings because, as I said, we have all done this. We have missed the opportunities to be in a ministry of presence. We feel guilty about it. We might say we will do better next time but we are not sure if we really will. So, for me the first question to answer is, "How do we move forward from the guilt of this sin?"

We need to ask for forgiveness from God and from those for whom you failed to be present at their time of need. We know God will grant forgiveness to us just as Jesus forgave his disciples after Easter. For the others, they likely will also forgive because unlike Jesus they weren't expecting your presence. They would have been strengthened if you showed up and they might have been slightly disappointed that you didn't, but because they have done the same to others they will usually grant you

forgiveness. So put the past behind you. Carrying around guilt is not productive. Like the disciples, accept the forgiveness and move on. Jesus did not give up on them because they slept that night instead of being present with him through prayer. He knew that the hours to come would have gone easier for them if they had been fortified by prayer just as he was able to handle what happened because he was strengthened by prayer. But it didn't occur and so they all moved on. Peter, James, and John did not hear after Easter morning that they no longer were disciples because of the events of that night. Even if the specific words of "you are forgiven" were not spoken, Jesus did see them as part of the group that would carry his message forward. They were still a part of the team. We know they felt some guilt because they retold their story of failure but they did not wallow in their guilt.

How do you move on? Look for opportunities to be in a ministry of presence today. Let the moments of failure in the past galvanize your resolve to do better today and tomorrow. If we look for ways to come along side someone in their times of need, be they big or small, we will find them. And here is the good news. If you miss an opportunity to be with someone recently you still have a chance. Think of ways to still be present. Perhaps the one year anniversary of a loss is coming up for a friend; take them out to lunch so you let them know you remember that this is a hard time for them. Or you know someone is struggling with health issues and initially you didn't make it to the hospital or go by their house. You sent a card but you have felt guilt about not doing more. Surprise them with an invitation to do something, like a meal out, or going to a movie or taking a walk on the beach. If their health is not such that they can get out, call and see when you can come for a day and plan to do something special, whether that is looking at old pictures together, or offering to write thank you notes for them. You get the idea.

There are other things you should not do when you are intentionally trying to be there for another in their time of need. When you arrive, you do it because you care, not out of guilt. We can all sense when someone is doing something because they feel they have to. Those feelings don't warm our hearts. Also, you don't surprise someone with your presence and then tell them the why behind it, that you missed the chance

earlier and are now trying to make it up. That too robs the gift of its power. Instead, show up because; because you love them, because you care about them, and because you are hurting because they hurt.

When you are intentionally striving to be present with people, to have a ministry of presence, there are a couple things you should do.

Enter into the activity with anticipation for how God might be involved in this situation or how your being there is a special, unrepeatable moment that you wouldn't want to miss. Think about how the story in the garden might have changed if the disciples had thought, "Wow, how special to spend some time with Jesus," or "Jesus needs me" they might have been more likely to stay awake. Instead this request of Jesus seemed like a burden and since they did not embrace his struggles they fell asleep. When we can look at the opportunities to be in a ministry of presence with a sense of purpose or expectation, it changes everything. Just like the story from the book where she talks of being awakened in the night by a baby needing to be fed. Her first response was a bit of resentment at having to get up again, but then the baby smiled and looked at her with love. The baby reached out and touched her face with that tiny hand and all of a sudden she realized she wanted to be nowhere else. Anticipation means banishing the thoughts about costs or time and instead seeing your presence as a gift given.

Second, don't ruin it by talking too much or trying to explain the whys of things. So many good-intentioned people allow their caring to get sidetracked into trying to explain why this event happened, usually using some kind of "it is part of God's plan" type of logic. These ideas often hurt more than help at that moment. Or they talk too much trying to cover the quiet moments with noise. This is not being really present. It is bringing your agenda to the table. You want to find a meaning to the pain and hurt that makes sense to you. You are uncomfortable with the silence. What most people want is someone to sit by them, be quiet with them, hold their hand and listen to them. This is what Jesus wanted, disciples to be in prayer with him because he was hurting. He didn't want a pep talk or Peter explaining how God's will is working, he wanted a friend. We do not always appreciate when we are there with someone in quiet solidarity how much

good we are doing. We feel often like we should be doing something more. But when you have been in those dark times and had the person being present, not much more, what a comfort it was.

So, anticipate opportunities and quietly be present. I think of those I recall who came along side of me during my father's illness. There were many who dropped by his house or called in the last week. Some talked too much and you could tell they were uncomfortable being there. One person announced that she came because it was her job as outreach person for a club. Now she liked my parents and probably wanted to be there but those words robbed much of the power of her presence. One I remembered was a longtime friend and colleague of my dad. Dan came and after giving my mom a hug just sat for the longest time holding my dad's hand, looking at his face as he labored to breathe. After a few moments you realized he was praying but decided that this particular prayer was between him and God and my dad whom I am sure was hearing it from the other side. He then turned to my mom and said, "I am so sorry. I will miss him but I am here for you. I will be back soon." He then got up and left. He was probably there not more than 20 minutes and said maybe 20 sentences but in being totally present with us we felt God was there. His was the visit that meant the most to my mother after dad's death. When Dan died last year she made sure to be there for his wife, before and at the service and afterwards.

Sleeping through opportunities to be in ministry is a common sin. We get busy and distracted. But there is grace, for us, for others. We can find forgiveness and we can try again. When we do it with anticipation and with joy, being present, not trying to fix anything, we find we are blessed and become a blessing to others.