

Matthew 26:47-56 “Transition to Transformation”

Our scripture this morning takes place during the last few days of Jesus’ life. Knowing that his time on earth was short, Jesus took his disciples to pray at the Garden of Gethsemane in Jerusalem at night. But the disciples were all having a hard time staying awake and Jesus got on their case for this. His prayer gives us a glimpse of how Jesus knew that his time was short ... that he was probably facing imminent death at the hands of his enemies. He asked God that if it were at all possible, he would rather not face death. “Not my will be done,” he prayed, “but rather yours.” When he had finished praying, he returned to the disciples only to face a group high priests and soldiers. They were there waiting to take him into custody because one of Jesus’ disciples betrayed him. Then there was some drama that involved one of the disciples grabbing a sword and cutting someone’s ear off. Then Jesus healed the person and told the crowd that this whole incident was the fulfillment of scriptures. This is usually a scripture we reserve for Maundy Thursday, but the reason I wanted to bring it to the table this week was for that last sentence: “Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.”

In the garden that night, when the disciples faced the ultimate test, they fled. As strange as this sounds, the disciples transitioned into a new stage of spiritual maturity that night. Let’s call that stage, “Transformation.” That may sound a bit strange because usually we associate transformation with something good ... something positive. But we’re talking about a group of Jesus’ closest followers ... ones who weren’t just disciples, but *apostles*. Jesus had many disciples. “Disciples” is a word we use to describe someone who has dedicated their lives to following in the footsteps of their teacher. “Apostle” is the word we use to describe one who has another level of authority than a disciple. In the story of Jesus, we recognize the twelve disciples that Jesus specifically called to be his inner-circle of apostles. And those apostles bailed on Jesus. “They deserted him and fled.” These are the people who literally dropped everything to follow Jesus all around the countryside through crowds of people who flocked around him to be

blessed, to be healed, to be made clean and whole. They dedicated their lives to Jesus' teaching. They learned how to heal others too. They traveled with Jesus into some scary places. They knew that there were people in authority who were threatened by Jesus' teachings and who wanted to shut him up permanently, but they stuck with him.

You could say, "Yeah, but what about Judas? Judas wasn't really 'with him.'" In fact, we wouldn't be reading this passage about Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane if it hadn't been for Judas' betrayal! True. But the fact remains, "they deserted him and fled." When it became clear that the people who wanted to kill Jesus finally cornered him, that inner circle of disciples ... those apostles ... fled. Three years of gaining new insight on the scriptures, intense spiritual enlightenment, hands-on training, and learning to articulate what God's reign on earth will be like ... down the tubes. And now Jesse is going to try to convince you that this was a *good* thing and call it a "transition into transformation?" Good luck preacher.

I see this event as a time of deeper spiritual awakening. It sure isn't a joyful time. In fact, it's a time of bitter awareness. The disciples came face to face with the measure of their failures. They came face to face with their naïve understanding about what this whole "being a disciple of Jesus" was all about. Even though Jesus told them, "This will not be easy." Even though he said, "Although I am who you say I am, I'm probably not what you think I am." And the disciples probably just smiled and nodded. Later they'd get together and say, "Now ... what in the world did Jesus mean by that?" "Oh who cares. He says all sorts of things that don't make sense. But good grief, he's the Messiah! As long as we hang out with him, we're safe, right? He's going to come in, wipe out the Romans, set up a new kingdom and we'll be back on top of the food chain again. We'll all live happily ever after! I mean, it's pretty black and white when you consider all the prophetic scriptures, right? I mean ... really ... what could go wrong?" See, the disciples had a naïve and immature understanding of what it meant to be a true disciple. The incident in the Garden of Gethsemane proved it. They deserted him and

fled. They failed. And you know what? This needed to happen. For them to transition into a more mature understanding of discipleship, they had to fail. And you know what? So do we.

Think about what happens to us when our simplistic, black-and-white, concrete answers to life's very complex problems just don't work. We go along thinking, "Everything I ever needed to know about the faith I learned in Sunday School." Okay, well that's true to a point. A good Sunday School teacher will teach you how to navigate the Bible. You'll get a basic overview of the Bible's narrative flow and how all these different books work together to tell the story of the relationship between God and God's people. You'll get the building blocks for a strong moral foundation. Love God. Love others. Love yourself. Don't steal. Don't lie. Don't covet what isn't yours. Share what you have. Reach out to people. When you do bad things, there will be consequences. When you do good things, there will be rewards. Then something happens that challenges these lessons. All of a sudden, our simple answers don't seem to be working. What do I do now? What do I do when I come to the painful realization that I don't have all the wisdom I thought I had ... or that I needed? Well ... when this happens, a lot of people drop out. They'll say, "Nope. As hard as I tried, I could not achieve the level of faith that I desired. So just forget it. I'm out of here. It doesn't work." But you know what I think? I think this is just the beginning of a new path in our journey toward spiritual maturity.

Unfortunately, the church hasn't always understood this movement in spiritual life and it's unprepared to address these personal crises. Sometimes church members, and I'm including pastors and leaders too, will only offer superficial prescriptions that are inadequate. "Oh, just pray and read your bible." "Umm ... okay. Any particular book or passage?" "Oh ... it's all good." Here's where the church gets in trouble when it comes to youth and young adults. See, this is the population who are in a vulnerable position in life. They're getting out there ... getting a taste of the world. They're learning that not everybody plays by the same rules. They're learning that there really

aren't that many simple, "either-or" "black-and-white" answers to the questions they face every day. And it's not, "*When* do I face these tough questions and situations," it's "*how many times a day* do I face them?" When the church gives them the same old superficial answers, youth and young adults will drop out after high school or college. There are some older adults who might do this too, which is unfortunate. The one that breaks my heart is older adults who may have been in the church for years but who just don't see a need for further education that helps them along a path to spiritual maturity.

But ... for those who can welcome and affirm this much-needed time of transition into transformation? It's a gift. And with this gift, much promise unfolds! No, it's not fun to look in the mirror and recognize the times we've failed ... the times we've "deserted and fled." It's not very uplifting to practice self-examination and come face to face with our failures. But for the ones who are brave enough to do this? Wow! God responds with a measure of grace and forgiveness that far exceeds our faults and failures. Yes, the disciples deserted and fled from the Garden of Gethsemane. But was that the last time we saw them? Nope. Well, there was Judas. We learn that he killed himself because he couldn't live with his failure anymore. Here's a thought ... do you think Jesus would have forgiven Judas if he repented and asked for forgiveness? See, we don't know because there isn't a passage in scripture that says, "Oh yeah, he would have been forgiven," or "nope, he committed the unpardonable sin." But that doesn't *stop* people from saying, "Yes he would have been forgiven" or "No he wouldn't." But when we're on a path to spiritual maturity, we can say, "Well ... let's talk about it. Let's see if there other examples in scripture that would support or contest this. Let's be in prayer together and see what kind of understanding the spirit leads us to."

What we *do* know for sure is that the other 11 disciples eventually came back, witnessed the Resurrected Christ, and believed. They received Jesus' great commission to go into the world and bring the good news that God is reconciling the world. They listened and complied when

Jesus told them to go wait in Jerusalem so that they could receive the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. And with the power of that Holy Spirit, they began to change the world. Why? Because they confronted their failures rather than denying them. Then they discovered how to confront and overcome those shortcomings so that they could grow in faith. It was a big step for them ... a big transition in their transformation into spiritual maturity. Same goes for us.

When we desire ways to overcome our shortcomings and grow in faith and action, we're taking steps toward becoming more like Jesus. Spiritual maturity means we can recognize that we're both saints *and* sinners. And we can endure our imperfections because we know we're on a journey where perfection *isn't the true goal*. The goal is *faithfulness*. In the garden, the disciples were bewildered and confused. Throughout the resurrection they remained overwhelmed. At Pentecost, they became so full of God's spirit, that they were willing to lay down their lives for Jesus. In fact, most of them did die just like Jesus because, like Jesus, they knew that the promise of God's reign was worth laying down their lives. Never again would they betray or abandon Jesus. They were now truly living life in the Spirit, which is what we'll be talking about next week to wrap this series up.