

Lent – A Time of Renewal of Obedience
Mark 14:32-42
March 15, 2017

They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took Peter, James, and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,” he said to them. “Stay here and keep watch.” Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. “Abba, Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Simon,” he said to Peter, “are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.” Once more he went away and prayed the same thing. When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. They did not know what to say to him. Returning the third time, he said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Enough! The hour has come. Look, the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!”

Grace, mercy, and peace from our Lord, Jesus Christ, who is our example of obedience to the will of the Father.

When I sat down to write this sermon, I realized how little thought I had ever given to the concept of obedience. Oh, I understand what it means to obey. I don't suppose there has ever a time in my life when I didn't have at least one person over me. But, still, I never really spent much time thinking about obedience.

Maybe that stems from being an American. We Americans like to see ourselves as rugged individualists. We like to believe that we are what we are because we worked to make us what we are. And we don't like the idea of submitting to anyone or anything. I'm sure you're aware of the fact that the word 'obey' has been removed from the vows most brides take today.

Why do you suppose that is? Why is it that people have such a difficult time accepting their obedience to another? I gave this question some thought and the only answer I could come up with was pride. People are proud – and I don't mean a good pride. People are filled with the idea that they are on top of the food chain and they shouldn't have to bend their knee under any circumstances. We like to be first and that often gets in the way of being obedient.

Looking at tonight's reading, we have two examples of obedience – the disciples and Jesus. We see two kinds of obedience – passive and active. We're going to look at the passive and active obedience of both Jesus and his disciples so we can take a look at our obedience. First, we will deal with the obedience of the disciples.

This scene takes place on Maundy Thursday, after the Passover meal and before Jesus is arrested. Jesus takes his disciples, minus Judas, to Gethsemane. Jesus gives his

disciples an order and they willingly comply. Jesus tells them, "Sit here while I pray." Now, this is the kind of obedience that many Christians prefer, even us Lutheran Christians. This order calls for passive obedience. Passive obedience is when you obey by doing nothing. Too many Christians read in their Bibles things like "trust in the Lord" or "the Lord will provide" and they think that means they should excel in passive obedience. They think their role in life is to just sit still and let God do everything. And if God doesn't get it done, they're sure someone else will come along and tend to things.

That accounts for eight of the disciples. Jesus took the big three, Peter, James, and John with him a little farther. These three get a different order, "Stay here and keep watch." This calls for a different kind of obedience. This calls for active obedience. These three have actually been given something to do – keep watch. Active obedience isn't as popular as passive obedience because active obedience calls for action – and usually the action of someone else's choosing.

So how do the disciples fare? Not so good. When Jesus returns an hour later, he finds his favorite three asleep. (By the way, when was the last time you prayed for an hour?) When Jesus was praying, instead of keeping watch like they were told, the disciples fell asleep. Why? Some would say it was late and they were probably tired. That might be true, but there is a deeper reason.

Have you ever pushed yourself beyond your normal limits for something you really wanted to do? Stayed up past your bedtime to watch the new year come in. Jogged that extra mile even after your body told you it was time to stop. Eaten that last piece of pie even after your stomach told you it was time to stop.

People have a way of going above and beyond when it's a matter of self-interest. However, when the choice comes down to the individual or someone else, the someone else usually loses. That's what happened with those three disciples. Jesus had told them to keep watch. They fell asleep because they put their comfort ahead of Jesus' command.

I'm sure some of you may think I being a bit severe with the disciples but, if you think about it, that's really what happened. The problem wasn't that they just didn't have the energy to stay awake. None of them suffered from an energy shortage when the soldiers showed up and they ran. Furthermore, they fell asleep not once but three times.

Now, let's look at the obedience of Jesus during all this. First, Jesus took his disciples to Gethsemane and that was no accident. Jesus knew that Gethsemane was where Judas would take the soldiers to look for him. In other words, Jesus deliberately walked into an ambush. But he did so because he was following the will of his Father. Going in another direction would have only have foiled Judas' plot and Jesus knew that. It would also have foiled the Father's will and Jesus knew that, too. Jesus chose obedience to his Father. That was Jesus active obedience.

Jesus also practiced passive obedience. In Gethsemane Jesus prayed, "Take this cup

from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” That’s passive obedience carried to the limit. To fully appreciate the extent of Jesus’ passive obedience, we must consider two facts.

Jesus was true God. That means that Jesus was omniscient – he knew all things. Jesus knew what the next 24 hours had in store for him. He didn’t have to guess or worry about what harm may come – he knew what harm was coming. And, yet, he stayed and waited for Judas and the soldiers. He passively obeyed because it was the Father’s will.

The other fact was that Jesus was also true man. We don’t ever want to think that his suffering was somehow buffered by the fact that he was God. Look at his prayer. “Not what I will, but what you will.” Read between the lines and it’s not hard to see that Jesus’ human side wasn’t so keen on what the future held. The true man side of Jesus saw what the true God side saw and the human side recoiled. But he stayed and waited for Judas and the soldiers. Jesus forced his unwilling will into compliance with his Father’s will.

Now we need to take a look at our obedience. You see, we, too, have choices of obedience to make – both passive and active. We have to keep ourselves always under examination to be sure we are doing things that are in agreement with God’s will. To do this, let’s look at passive and active obedience in our lives.

Both passive and active obedience to God can be tricky. We tend to sit when we should be moving or we want to fight when we should be standing still. And, believe it or not, the mistakes we make don’t come from ignorance, they come from deliberate choices we make out of pride – a pride that refuses to admit that we don’t always know what’s best and we are not in charge.

We struggle with passive obedience because it’s hard to just sit and do nothing when we want a problem to be solved or a situation to be over with. There are many things in life that we have no control over and we don’t like that. We are resistant to the patience it takes to let God control matters when we are sick or a loved one lingers at death’s door. We don’t want to just pray for our unbelieving friend. We want to take out our Bible and beat them into faith. We tell others, “Let go and let God.” Then we turn to God and say, “Let go and let me.”

We also struggle with active obedience because Jesus wants us to do his things not our things. When it comes to active obedience, we sometimes shift over to passive obedience and say, “God will provide” or “I’m putting this in God’s hands” because we don’t want to do what the mission will take.

I know of a church that is struggling with financial problems. One day, I was talking to one of the members and I asked him what was being done about their money woes. He said, “We’re not worried. We’re just faithfully waiting for God to provide what we need.” I told him, “God has already provided what you need. God has provided you. What are you doing about the problem?”

Active and passive obedience. Left to our own devices, we will most always make the wrong choice. We can't trust our human nature to steer us in the proper course. We are sinful and that causes us to pridefully think we know what's best in all circumstances. We must learn to trust God. We must allow God to tell us when to sit and when to stand.

And how do we know what God wants? We read his Word. We study the Scriptures to learn the things that God would have us tend to and the things he wants us to leave alone. We give our full attention to the life Christ modeled for us and we pray for the Holy Spirit to help us live that life.

This Lenten season, immerse yourself in God's Word. Open the Bible and learn how to make your obedience to God the obedience God wants from you. Use these six weeks of Lent as a time of renewal of obedience. May God bless your efforts.