



July 28, 2019

Mount Olivet: A Place to Stay Together in the Darkness

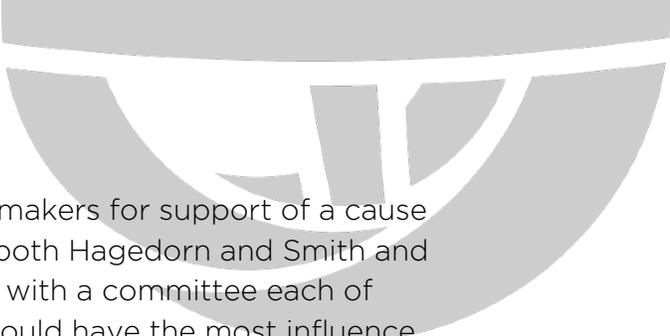
Pastor Lisa Kipp

Mark 14:32-42 NRSV

³²They went to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." ³³He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. ³⁴And he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake." ³⁵And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. ³⁶He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want." ³⁷He came and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep awake one hour?" ³⁸Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." ³⁹And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. ⁴⁰And once more he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to say to him. ⁴¹He came a third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Enough! The hour has come; the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴²Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

A week ago, I was in the air returning to MN with this group of fourteen high school students and adult chaperones that traveled to Washington, D.C. We shared many powerful and fun moments together. As I reflect on our time, the most impactful experiences for me were from the day we spent with the ELCA's advocacy office on Capitol Hill. None of us were quite sure what to expect. Our day began with introductions to advocacy by Abbigail Hull. She eloquently tied this important work of advocacy into our baptismal promises and described advocacy work as that of "having a vision of God's beloved community and wanting to help others see that."

As the morning progressed, we learned we were going to be meeting with two of our legislators from MN - Senator Tina Smith and an aid from Rep. Jim Hagedorn's



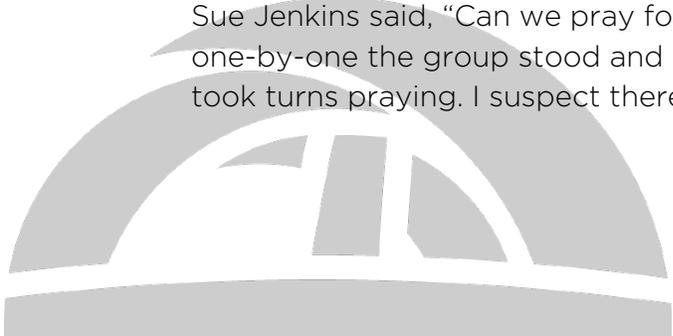
office. We were taught a specific way to ask our law makers for support of a cause that mattered to us, and then we were given bios of both Hagedorn and Smith and were encouraged to pick an issue that corresponded with a committee each of them served on, since this would be the areas they would have the most influence. We split into groups and got to work.

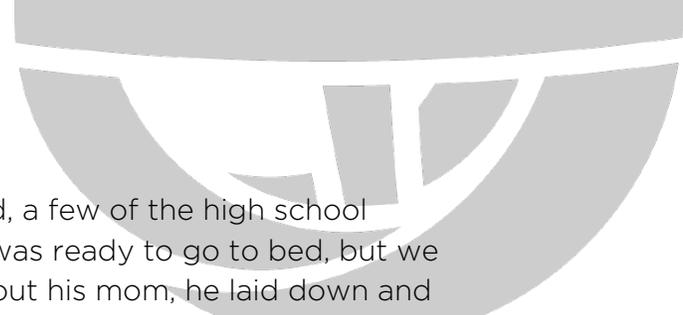
Our group members preparing to speak with Senator Smith chose to advocate for more mental health services in schools. They divided up the roles and practiced what they would say. I will admit, there was a part of me that doubted we would actually get quality facetime with a US Senator to speak about these matters. After a working lunch, we all made our way together toward the US Capitol with excitement (and a healthy dose of anxiety).

As it turns out, I couldn't have been more wrong about our time with Senator Smith. She came out to a gathering area minutes after we arrived. As she greeted the group, our youth began their advocacy work. People of Zumbro, you should be so proud of our young people and the way they spoke as representatives of this congregation. They spoke with clarity and confidence. From their hearts they risked vulnerability and shared deeply personal stories of their own experiences with depression and anxiety and grief. They articulated their faith as the basis for their convictions. And as they did this, Senator Smith listened intently, never losing eye contact, never rushing them, and continually validating what they had to say. Surprisingly, as they finished, she shared her own story of depression and the vulnerability she displayed when sharing that story on the floor of the US Senate. Before we left she embraced and thanked our young people who spoke from their hearts about the vision of God's community they hoped to see. It was an impactful moment that none of us will soon forget.

But you know, there's something about vulnerability and courage that begets more vulnerability and courage. That night as we processed our experiences as a group, sophomore Luke Hilleshiem quietly got up and left the room. After a while, I snuck out to find him crying on his bed in the bunkroom. Luke has given me permission to share this story. You might remember that his mom, Jill, died on May 20 of this year. The experiences of our day, the compassion of our group, and the deepening relationships among us all stirred up intense feelings of grief. I talked with Luke awhile, and then asked if he'd be willing to come back to the group and allow me to share why he'd left. He readily agreed.

As we returned, I shared some of what Luke was feeling with the group, Promptly Sue Jenkins said, "Can we pray for you?" Through tears, Luke nodded yes, and then one-by-one the group stood and surrounded him. We all laid hands on Luke and took turns praying. I suspect there weren't any dry eyes, but I confess that it was





hard to tell through my own tears. When we finished, a few of the high school students and I walked back to the bunkroom. Luke was ready to go to bed, but we promised we'd stay with him. After talking some about his mom, he laid down and his three friends and I stood by him. With a hand on his leg, or arm, or bunk rail, we just stood there. None of us knew exactly the right thing to say or do. Sometimes we bumbled our words, but we didn't leave until he was asleep.

As we stood there, I couldn't help but think of Jesus and the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane up on Mount Olivet. Bumbling might not be a deeply theological word, but I suspect it might be a just description of the disciples that night. For the first time since Jesus took the turn toward Jerusalem, we hear the gospel writers vividly describe Jesus' human emotions - distressed, agitated, deeply grieved. And what does Jesus really want Peter, James, and John (some of his closest friends) to do? He wants them to stay with him; to remain by his side.

The way I see it, this is one of those rare moments that Jesus practices vulnerability and allows the disciples to see his true humanity. He lets them in to share a place with him in his darkness. The disciples didn't quite get it right. They let Jesus down by falling asleep not once, but three times. Yet they stayed in that dark place with him when Jesus desired their companionship, even though they didn't quite understand what it would mean for them or for him.

This theme, this remaining with one another in the darkness and unknown comes forth time and again in Scripture. Consider some of the stories we know well—

Job encountered suffering upon suffering. Before his friends began to offer him some less than helpful advice, they sat on the ground with him silently for seven days and seven nights, sharing the burden with him.

Or consider Ruth and Naomi's journey together. They both lost their husbands. They were far away from any other extended family to care for them, yet Ruth chose to remain with her mother-in-law. The future unknown, they opted to face it together.

Or consider the disciples. Following Jesus' death and resurrection, they gathered and locked themselves in a room. They were afraid. Their future was also unknown, and so they stuck together.

We have a natural longing for people to be with us when life is hard. Whether it's the need to have someone hear our deepest longings, or the relief that someone else will share our suffering, or simply the reassurance that we don't face the





unknown future alone, it matters to know that others are willing to be there in those hard times beside us.

This is the good news of Jesus after all. Longing for God to be with us; to not be far off in the distance, God came to us in the incarnation – in the physical, human presence of Jesus walking beside, among, and with us – to listen, to share our suffering, and to reassure us that we are never alone.

As we live in community with one another we realize that the One who entered into relationship with us in the flesh as Jesus, also calls us into that same space with others. Into that same vulnerable act of sharing our emotions and risking to show up fully for the other. We are, as Martin Luther once said, to be like Christ to one another – serving one another, advocating for one another, showing up and being present.

I recently went back and watched the video I have of our high school students addressing Senator Smith that day on Capitol Hill. I was struck by her closing words to our group. She said this:

“I have a strong voice because I am a US senator, but you all coming to Washington and using your voices in this way, you know that is the way our democracy is supposed to work – that citizen advocates speak out about issues that you know are important in your community. You are fulfilling your mission to your church and your community and also to your democracy.”

This sounds to me like being like Christ to one another. This is the work that we are called to. It doesn't happen only when we meet with powerful lawmakers in DC. It happens when we show up at the bedside of a sick friend; when we listen again to a colleague who is hurting; when we meet for coffee and share life with our retired peers; when we bumble our words but stand around the bunkbed of a friend anyway because he needs people to just remain with him.

Dear friends, we all have periods in our lives in which we desperately need others to show up and be Christ for us. And we all have moments in time in which we are holding on to the light in someone else's darkness. Maybe you need others to show up for you right now. Maybe you're holding the light for someone else. Or maybe you find yourself needing and doing a little of both. Know that you're not alone. There is a whole community of us trying to make our way together and be like Christ for one another. But more importantly, you aren't alone because God in Christ Jesus is with you. Amen.

