

“Father, save me from this hour”?
Palm Sunday Sermon
at Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church
Edmonton, Alberta
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by Carol Penner
Text: John 12:12-36

We have been studying some of the questions that Jesus asks in the gospel of John, and today our question is: “Should I say, ‘Father save me from this hour?’” For the other three gospel writers, Jesus’ wrestling with God about his journey to the cross comes in the Garden of Gethsemane where he kneels and prays and says, “Not my will but yours be done.” In John’s gospel, Jesus goes to the garden, but it is just the place where Judas finds them. The wrestling, the thinking Jesus does about his path to the cross happens here, right around the procession into Jerusalem. John remembers this this questioning right next to the story of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.

Looking at this from a practical no-nonsense perspective, pragmatically, if someone was standing there hearing Jesus ask this question, they might ask, “Why even talk to God about saving you, you can save yourself!” Because Jesus is perfectly capable of saving himself from this hour. All he has to do is pull on the reins and turn that donkey around. Just don’t go to Jerusalem. You have the means of transportation. You are not under arrest. You have the freedom. If you want to be saved from this hour, then go for it. Giddyup and away he goes! Problem solved.

But of course it is not so simple. Jesus is trying to listen to what God wants him to do. And so he has felt compelled to come to Jerusalem, he has felt drawn to this city, where, he has told his disciples, he knows he will die.

What would that compulsion have felt like for Jesus as he went towards Jerusalem? Maybe it was an inner feeling, a certainty, a conviction, being drawn, called, seeing the light that this path is set before him. He knows he has to walk this road. He doesn’t see any road that he can take and still be himself.

This week I was reading an article by Karen Ridd, a peace studies professor from Winnipeg. In 1989, when she was in her 20s, she went to work for a peace organization called Peace Brigades International in El Salvador. Her job was to accompany human rights workers as they did their work, to be like unarmed body guards, who protected people with their presence. And they had a lot of work to do because the El Salvadorean government was arresting and torturing people who were working for justice and peace. The idea behind Karen’s presence was that if a North American was with one of these workers, they were less likely to disappear, because someone would witness it and document it. There was a belief that the El Salvadorean government would not touch someone with an international passport.

And perhaps international attention would help save anyone who disappeared. So North American witnesses were serving an important function.

Karen was accompanying Marcela Rodriguez Diaz, a woman who was working with refugees. They were in the church office where this organization was centred, when the El Salvador police raided the office, came and they arrested Marcela, and they arrested Karen too, along with other staff. They were taken to a police station, a police station where they tortured people. They were handcuffed, blindfolded, kept standing without food or water and interrogated. Karen could hear people being tortured around her. The police threatened to rape and mutilate her. She knew this was true because she knew people who had been tortured in this police station, and she could hear it happening all around her.

Then they told her that she was being released. Save me from this hour!!!! It was happening! But she was being released alone. And she knew that Marcela was still in the prison. She would not walk out the door of the prison, "I won't go without Marcela," Karen announced. The police took her back to the cell, and locked her up again. So now Karen was back in prison. She really thought they could both be tortured and killed now. The soldiers came to her and asked her, "Why didn't you go? And she said, "You are soldiers, you know what solidarity is. You know that if a comrade is down or fallen in battle, you wouldn't leave them, and I can't leave my comrade, not now, not here. You understand."*

The soldiers were quiet for a long time. Then one of them said gently, "Yes, we know why you are here." For the rest of the time they were in prison, guards kept coming and wanting to see them, the "inseparable ones." They responded with respect to the connection between the two women. Eventually they were both released.

I think about what happened. Karen was totally free! She could have walked out of that prison, got a taxi to the airport and gotten on the first plane out of the country. But she turned around and went back into her cell. She walked in there, she was not dragged. Why did she do that? Something compelled her to turn around and go back in. Her love for her friend showed her the path, the path of companionship, the path of accompaniment, the path of solidarity. She went back into the prison.

Why did Jesus not turn that donkey around? Sometimes you know the right thing to do and you know you have to do it. You just know it. It's not that they were unafraid, it's not that they were confident they would be saved from death. They just knew in their heart, they knew the path that God set out for them.

Today I am talking about suffering that is freely chosen. Suffering that you could avoid, but don't. How do you know when to walk into it, and how do you know when to turn around and walk away.

Because not all suffering is necessary. The people of Israel were suffering in slavery in Egypt. They were delivered by God. They in fact thought about turning around

and going right back to Egypt. But God through Moses convinced them that “No, Egypt is the wrong direction. Head this way, to the Promised Land.” God wanted to take them to a land flowing with milk and honey. Away from the bricklaying servitude that had been forced on them. God wanted to maximize their freedom.

Jesus delivered people from suffering. He offered healing to a man who was born blind. The man can walk out of disease by simply going and bathing his eyes in the Pool of Siloam (John 9). Will he do it, or will he say, “Actually, I feel called to a life of blindness.” No, he walks into freedom.

There are many stories in the Bible where God delivers people, where God stops their suffering.

And in Jesus’ life there are a couple of places where he is being persecuted. I think of when he went to preach in his hometown of Capernaum; the crowds were so angry with him, they wanted to throw him off a cliff. Did Jesus embrace the cliff, did he stand at the edge of the cliff and say, “Into your hands I commend my spirit?” No, he had two legs, he used those legs to go to freedom, to walk right through that crowd.

Another time earlier in this gospel, the Jewish leaders were wanting to kill Jesus. Did Jesus stand around and say, “Here I am, kill me!” No! He used his two legs and walked back to Galilee, to freedom. You wonder why, if all he had to do was to die, why he didn’t just die and get it over with. Save us from our sins right off the bat.

There was a time that wasn’t right, and there was a time when his heart told him it was right for him to embrace suffering. In this scripture passage, for some reason, right after some Greeks come to him to ask about him, that suddenly Jesus knows. “NOW is the right time.” Suddenly he sees the writing on the wall, and he knows that he cannot walk away. This is the fulfillment of what God wants him to do.

I wonder what would have happened if Karen’s parents had been standing in the door of the prison when she was released. I remember where I was in 1989 when she was arrested and it was in the news. Karen’s father was a prominent professor in Winnipeg, very involved in peace and justice work, I had heard him speak when I was studying at college in Winnipeg, I had even seen his daughter. So when it hit the news in Canada that this Canadian woman had been arrested, I was worried for her. Her parents immediately got diplomatic services working for her release. What if when she had been released, they had grabbed hold of her and hugged her. They would have said, “Thank God our prayers have been answered, you have been saved from this hour of torture!” It would have been hard to explain to them what she had to do. “Thank you for helping to get me released, but I have to go back in there. Yes, they might kill me, but I have no choice, this is who I am, this is what I am meant to do.” As a parent, it would be hard to see her walk in. They would wonder, “Maybe there are other ways you could work to get this woman released, is this the best way?” But it’s not their choice, it’s Karen’s choice, she has to follow what is in her

conscience. I think of this, because now at Easter we remember Mary was at the foot of the cross.

What about us? How do we know when to embrace suffering and walk into it, and when do we turn our donkeys around and say “Giddyup.”

Swiss Mennonites were living and prospering in Pennsylvania in the late 1700s. They had farms and families and were well established. But there was discussion that they might have to serve in the army. The United States was a new country, newly freed from Britain, and the new government wasn't keen on giving military exemptions to anyone. Some Mennonites decided that if they stayed, they might face a lot of persecution. So they had legs, and they started walking, they walked all the way to the Niagara Peninsula in 1798 where they established a settlement on the Twenty Mile Creek, which was the first Mennonite church in Canada. That was the church I pastored, started by people who were choosing to come to a country where they might not have to suffer so much.

For Mennonites in the Ukraine in the 1920s, it was hard to decide. They were facing persecution. Times were tough, they were facing violence. For many of them, they decided to head to the Promised Land of North America or South America, or even China. Anywhere to get away. They felt God was leading them. Other people, they weren't so sure it was necessary to flee.

Mennonites have been good at running away, or wanting to run away. And we call that God's leading. Carol Dyck has written a powerful musical piece called “Every deliverance”, and many of you have sung that story. A story of running away from suffering; and thanking God for the opportunity to do that. Thanking God for every deliverance.

I knew a woman once who was single. She told me that she had been married, she was separated from her husband. She had been beaten up by him a couple of times, which was shocking and horrible, and she felt so embarrassed and ashamed. And then one day he came into the kitchen and she was so mad at him that she took a pile of plates from the cupboard and she threw them on the floor and they all smashed to bits. When she was telling me this story, she explained to me what this meant to her. “That was my wedding china. I loved that china. Why did I smash something I loved? I knew at that moment that something was happening that was bad for me, I was becoming someone I didn't want to be. So I left him.” She went to her parent's home. They would not let her stay overnight. They told her that she had married him before God, and God would help her, she had to be faithful and go home and be a good wife. There must be something wrong with her that he was getting so mad. She went home to her husband. It took her another year before she had the courage to leave again.

Because Mennonites have had such powerful experiences of running away from violence, of fleeing for safety, you would think that we would be at the forefront of

helping women who are fleeing from violence. You would think advice like this would never be given to women from Mennonites. But that is not the case. Sometimes Mennonites have looked at someone suffering and said, "That is your cross to bear." But how do we know it is their cross to bear? Maybe God is saying, "Let my people go!" Maybe God is calling you to be a Moses, and help people go to safety.

It is confusing for us. Sometimes we are called to freedom, like Jesus, who would not let himself be thrown off a cliff. Sometimes we are called to suffer, called to take up our cross like Jesus. To walk into a situation that will be painful for us.

I had a friend who miscarried a baby. She had been praying and hoping for a baby, and then when she finally got pregnant, after a long time trying, she was ecstatic. But a few months later, the pregnancy ended, and she was heartbroken. It was a real time of sorrow for her.

Around six months later, I got a call from her. She said that another woman in her church had ended up in the hospital, and she had miscarried. And she said to me, "You know Carol, I thought to myself, 'The right thing to do is to go and visit this woman.' But if I went there, I know it would bring up all that pain that I am just now starting to get past." I could see why she would not want to go. Surely there were other people in the church who could go and visit this woman in this hospital. But then she went on, she said, "But do you know, Carol, I just felt compelled to go, I knew that I had heard about this because God wanted me to go and be with that woman." And she described the experience of going and how she and the other woman wept and wept together. She could have walked away or found someone else to suffer with that woman, but she felt a call from God to go.

There was another friend I had from college. I was driving through downtown Winnipeg with him one night, and as we were driving down the street, we saw this group of people standing in a circle. And as we got closer you could see that two people were on the ground, and it was two women, and one of them was smashing the other woman's head against the sidewalk. It had just dawned on me what was actually happening when the car jolted to a stop and my friend had stopped it in the middle of the road and run out and pushed his way through the crowd and came between the two women. He stopped the fight. The hurt woman went away with her friends, and he didn't get back into the car until she was well away to safety. My friend could have pressed the gas pedal. Giddyup, this is a dangerous place, let's get out of here. Instead he charged right into the midst of the situation, not knowing what was going to happen. Why did he do that? It was the right thing to do, he knew it in his heart. Being the person he was, he knew he could not do anything different.

I remember hearing a radio story about a woman who was travelling through the West Bank in a car. She was a woman from Europe, but she was living at the time in Israel. She was driving along one day and she saw two Israeli soldiers with a little boy around 8 or 9. They were pointing their gun at him and yelling at him, and he

was just standing there. She said she slammed on the brakes jumped out of the car and ran to be with the little boy. She put her arms around him and said, "What are you bothering this little boy for? He is a child, you should not be bothering him." The soldiers looked at her and they raised their guns to her head and said, "Go away, get out of here. We mean it. This is not your concern." They were so threatening that suddenly she felt very very afraid for her life, she felt they would hurt her. In her mind she thought, "They are soldiers, why am I interfering in something that soldiers are doing." And so she left the boy and got into her car and she drove away. I heard her telling this story on the radio, she was being interviewed by a journalist. The journalist asked her, how has that experience affected you? She said, "That happened four years ago, and ever since that day I have regretted my actions. I wonder, how could I let those soldiers intimidate me, why didn't I stay with that boy? And every time I drive down the street, I search the crowds, I am looking for the face of that boy, did he survive?"

We are put into situations, our heart tells us to do something, God calls us to do something. Will we follow? Whenever I think of the story about the woman in Palestine I think about a small little incident that happened to me when I was visiting Kenya shortly after we were married. We had stopped at a border, and were waiting for the security people to come and check out our passports. Our group got off the bus, but before we did that, our tour guide said, there will be beggars here, don't give money to the beggars because they won't stop bothering you if you give them anything.

That's what he said. So we get off the bus, and sure enough there were different people who pushed their way through the crowd toward us, with their hands out, begging. Dutifully, we did not open our wallets, we did not give them anything. Then a few minutes later a woman walked very slowly over to us. She was a tall woman, and she was carrying a very tiny baby. A baby that looked very very thin. She held out her hand and then she pointed to her baby. She drew our attention to the baby, to its thin cheeks, she stroked her finger under her babies chin and then she held out her hand to us, she appealed to us with her eyes, with her expression. I dutifully shook my head, I would not give her anything. But I wanted to give her something. She needed something, and my money was six inches from my hand, and all I had to do was reach into my wallet and I could have given her something. I didn't.

I didn't think much of it at the time. But I didn't know how that baby's face, how that mother's face would stay with me. Four years later I had a baby of my own. I held my baby and I was still thinking of that mother, of that little baby with the thin face, and how I did not move my hand six inches to give her some money. What was I scared of? What kind of situation would have happened if I gave her some money. I didn't know, I wouldn't risk it.

There are times in life where you do the right thing. The right thing is to walk away from the suffering. Praise God for deliverance. There are times in life where you do the wrong thing. You know what the right thing to do is, but for various reasons, you

don't have the courage to do it. Ask God for forgiveness. Learn from the mistake, so you don't do that again. There are times in life where you look at other people suffering, and you want to judge what that person should do. Ask God to give that person wisdom, ask God to give you wisdom to know how to help them with their decision. And there are times where you do the right thing and that is to walk straight into suffering. God gives you a clear path to walk, a path that will lead to the cross. And you know you have to take it. Ask God to save you from this hour. If you have time, ask us, ask your community to pray for you. We pray for deliverance, but we do not always get it, in this life.

I think about Jesus on that day, on that dusty road, on a hot day in Jerusalem. There he is on the donkey, paused at the threshold of the gate of the city of Jerusalem. He holds the reins in his hands. The crowds are cheering, the palms are waving, they are crying the words "Hosanna, hosanna", which mean, "Save us, save us." Jesus knows the road ahead. He gives the donkey a little nudge, and heads into the city of Jerusalem.

May God give us courage this week, to walk that path, the path that Jesus took into Jerusalem. Let's pray:

God, grant us the serenity to escape the danger we need not face,
courage to face the suffering we must,
and the Wisdom to know the difference.
Amen.

*"Towards a Pedagogy of Radical Love" by Karen Ridd

<https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/publications/conrad-grebel-review/issues/spring-2014/towards-pedagogy-radical-love>