

The Gardens of CoVid-19

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, April 5 2020)

Friends, I send my deepest love to you as we all continue to self-isolate, stay safe and continue to communicate with family and friends and live in peace within this newly textured life we find ourselves.

This Sunday marks the end of our Lenten series, *Entering the Passion of Jesus*," based on Amy-Jill Levine's book *Entering the Passion of Jesus*. We journeyed with Jesus through his last week of life, placing ourselves into freeze-framed moments of that week: The Triumphal Entry, the Temple incident, the Temple teachings, the anointing woman, and the Last Supper. The series enabled us to freeze-frame familiar biblical stories and to see them in new ways. On this Holy Week walk, we have witnessed a passionate Jesus who risked his reputation and his life in the service of God's love.

Entering the passion of Jesus took a risk on our part as well as it meant facing ourselves and asking difficult questions about our actions and behaviors. We faced our fears, our failures, and addressed them. Whom have we betrayed? Whom have we denied? Along the way, we heard how Jesus' courage and determination impacted the lives and faith of those gathered around him. How did Jesus' courage and passion impact you?

Today is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week in the Christian tradition. If you follow the script, you have an opportunity to experience a Palm Sunday parade with a most glorious and familiar hymn. Now we are invited to join Jesus in Gethsemane, the place he went to pray.

There are many themes one can explore in this story. As I reflected on it in light of the situation in which we are living, the images of gardens and prayer came to mind. So now come with me to the gardens of CoVid-19.

Jesus was a man of prayer. He often went to quiet places such as a mountain, a garden, or the wilderness, so that he could reconnect with his spirit. This connection was vital to him, providing him with the energy required to continue his ministry and help him find the courage to remain on his life's path. As we know, this risky and compassionate path eventually led to his crucifixion.

For Jesus, Gethsemane appears to be a place of choice for prayer. Perhaps for him Gethsemane was a "thin place." Within the Celtic Christian tradition, a "thin place" is where the human and divine meet, a soft, permeable boundary between humanity and divinity. This can be either a physical or a spiritual place. For the Celtic people, prayer is a thin place

in which they experience reflectively their own human and sacred selves. Celtic mystic John O'Donahue defines the thin place of prayer as the "threshold where soul and life interflow; it is the conversation between desire and reality."

In the freeze-framed moment in Gethsemane, we witness so compellingly the struggle between desire and reality. Jesus knew his death was close, and he prays with deep anguish, "Let this cup pass away from me." Jesus does not want to die. His desire to live is strong.

Spiritually speaking, Gethsemane is a place of great mental and spiritual suffering and prayer is the thin space in which our human and sacred selves meet profoundly, the soul and life interflowing. Gethsemane, a place of deep emotion, and prayer, the vehicle by which this emotion is freed. Jesus feels deeply the sense of loss that is to come and the sadness that his disciples could not be there for him. He is anguished because his passion for justice and God's love is considered a threat, rather than a means by which to uphold compassionate values that heal and give hope to humanity.

Jesus asks, "Abba," his father, to step in and stop the inevitable, to "remove this cup from me." The answer is no. Levine encourages us to see here something about divine risk. The story could play out with God removing the cup. God has the power to do so. Instead, the story challenges and teaches. "God has to refrain from using that heavenly power to stop the arrest, stop the trials, stop the suffering, and stop the death. Jesus will suffer, and God will suffer as well."

In the Jewish tradition, the rending of cloth is a symbol of mourning. Accordingly, when Jesus dies, the veil, or curtain in the Temple is torn for this same reason. The story teaches that God mourns with Jesus. Jesus and God share in our human experience, in our sadness, fear, anxiety, loss, grief, and death. Through Jesus, God, who is everywhere and everyone, is in our human condition. God is with us; we are not alone.

Human life includes Gethsemane experiences, situations in which our will wrestles with life's struggles and deep emotions to find its way toward love, peace, and calm.

The world is now in a Gethsemane place. Over the past month or so, the frames of our lives have been broken apart. Many of the certainties on which we have come to depend are no more. Nothing is acting in the way it should. The habitual order of things, gone. What used to be clear to us is no longer clear, what we took for granted, and what shaped our understanding of how the world works, have been turned upside down. We have entered a state of utter confusion.

In this Gethsemane place, there is fear, anguish, sadness, loneliness, loss, and anxiety. We are forced into self-isolation bombarded continuously by news, scenes, and stories, of the growing upheaval around us. All this information is playing havoc on our state of mind. "God, please remove this cup from us," becomes our personal prayer. And we need prayer.

According to Levine, the Gethsemane story teaches about the importance of personal prayer even when the answer may be no. We need this personal prayer, in whatever form that may take, to sustain us, to lament, and to help us find courage. Expressing our feeling through prayer is essential. Jesus experiences numerous emotions, fear, heartache, and sadness. He must pray three times before he reaches within himself to a place of peace. "Let this cup be removed, let this cup be removed, let this cup be removed." Then, acceptance, not my way but yours.

In this Gethsemane place, we must accept our cup by acknowledging all the confusion and complexities of this reality. We must wrestle with our fears and concerns so we can make room for acceptance, peace, and calm. God will not take this away, but God's love is with us. When acceptance opens its doors and when peace settles the heart, what we discover is that there is another garden.

The story does not end in Gethsemane. During Holy Week, we move from one garden to another. Levine calls this garden "a place where Jesus, the new Adam in a new garden, manifests his power." In this garden, says John's Gospel, "Mary Magdalene will meet her resurrected rabbi." This is the garden of New Life.

In this garden of new life, Jesus moves from death to life. This is a resurrection moment. Jesus is resurrected into the hearts of his followers. Death could not end what Jesus left, his compassion, commitment, and love and his vision of a new realm. That was significant. In the confusion of their lives, something new was dawning. The disciples had to rethink everything.

Here we are, in two gardens simultaneously, Gethsemane and the garden of new life. Gethsemane requires us to let go of so much and to feel so much. However, in this letting go, and in the feeling, new life is being birthed. There has been a cosmic shift, and in this topsy-turvy world people are being hugely creative, keeping things together but in new ways.

Our scarred and broken existence is being reconstructed in unpredictable and unprecedented ways. There is a renewed connection, even as we are more separated. There is a new global connection, and there are new insights into what it means to be alive. We see the earth healing and the environment restored. We see now that the more

physically connected we were before the virus, the more disconnected we were becoming. In the garden of new life there is a renewed appreciation for what is important in life. What is important is family, friends, community, relaxation, calm, less stress, deeper heartfelt connections, and great imagination. Someone said, "The more we are unable to reach out with our hands, the more we reach out with our hearts."

Capuchin Franciscan friar Father Richard Hendrick beautifully articulates a vision of this garden of new life in his poem, 'Lockdown.' Here is a portion of it:

They say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise
You can hear the birds again.
They say that after just a few weeks of quiet
The sky is no longer thick with fumes
But blue and grey and clear.
They say that in the streets of Assisi
People are singing to each other
across the empty squares,
keeping their windows open
so that those who are alone
may hear the sounds of family around them.
All over the world people are slowing down and reflecting
All over the world people are looking at their neighbors in a new way
All over the world, people are waking up to a new reality
To how big we really are.
To how little control we really have.
To what really matters.
To Love.
So, we pray, and we remember that
Yes, there is fear.
But there does not have to be hate.
Yes, there is isolation.
But there does not have to be loneliness.
Yes, there is sickness.
But there does not have to be disease of the soul
Yes, there is even death.
But there can always be a rebirth of love.
Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now.

And so, my friends let us each day wake to the choices we make as to how we will live now. Let us pray in the gardens of CoVid-19. Prayer, be it meditation, silence, movement, words or actions, is a melding together of the sacred and human energies within us and with others in the world. It is a moment of letting go and opening ourselves to the divine love that surrounds us in this new reality.

Through prayer, as the sacredness of ourselves, encounters the humanness of ourselves, we mindfully free compassionate attention and energy on creation, on others, and on ourselves. Our inward-focused attention leads to outward displays of hope, optimism, and faith.

As we reside in the gardens of Covid19 our prayers open us to acceptance and hope, making room for new understandings and new insights that awaken us to experience our lives in different, unexpected, beautiful, and meaningful ways. In the garden of renewed life, resurrection occurs over and over in us every day of our lives. Amen.