

*Sermon Series: 24 Hours That Changed the World*

*Sermon Title: The Garden*

*Psalm 118: John 18:1; Matthew 26:36-45*

*Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling*

*Pleasant Grove United Methodist Church*

*February 25, 2018*

Congratulations, Pleasant Grove, for being a continuous worshipping and serving congregation for 150 years! This is no small thing and certainly something to be celebrated and recognized. 150 years in which lives were changed by the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit. How many people have come through these doors to worship our Lord and Savior? How many committed their lives to Christ at this altar rail as they received baptism and affirmed their faith? How many have received Holy Communion? How many have exchanged marriage vows? How many have we celebrated their death and resurrection in the Lord? We cannot begin to count the number of lives that have been changed through this congregation.

And I am one whose life was changed by being here as a student pastor for four of these 150 years, 1998-2002. This was a great learning environment. Even though there was some hesitation about having a woman as a pastor, once I was here, I received so much support. This congregation was an answer to my prayers. I knew God called me into the ministry, but I had no idea how financially it was going to happen. Pleasant Grove provided our family housing with the utilities and medical, paid for books and mileage to and from Wesley Theological Seminary, as well as part of the tuition

expenses. Not only did Pleasant Grove play an important role in changing my life, but also the lives of our family. I hope in some small way God worked through me during those four years to change lives here, too. Thank you, Pleasant Grove, for all you have given to me and my family, and I give thanks for the 150 years that God has been changing lives at Pleasant Grove.

The Lenten series is “24 Hours that Changed the World.” This week we are looking at Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane which is really an olive orchard. Gethsemane means oil press so olives may have been pressed there into cooking oil and fuel for lamps. In our part of the world gardens aren’t orchards. We have flower gardens that offer a rainbow of color and an array of fragrance and beauty. We can have vegetable gardens that give us fresh vegetables for nutritious and flavorful dishes. When our family lived here in the parsonage, we would often find boxes of garden vegetables on the deck. The gardeners of Pleasant Grove were generous with their tomatoes, squash, cucumbers, and zucchini. And we very much appreciated them since this pastor didn’t seem to have enough hours in the day to add gardening to the list of things to do.

Before I entered the ministry our family had a vegetable garden. It was one of the few places I could find some space to be alone. No one would come out to be with Mom pulling weeds, because she might just make you pulling weeds with her. Pulling weeds became my quiet time, my prayer time in the garden. I would be reminded of the song my grandmother would sing, “I Come to the Garden Alone.” This was a time in which Jesus

was walking and talking with me. But this song is not about a vegetable garden or the Garden of Gethsemane, but it's about Mary encountering the Risen Christ on that first Easter morning.

Before we can get to Easter Sunday morning, we must walk through these twenty-four hours that changed the world which begins on Thursday night in the Upper Room. Jesus and his disciples have just celebrated the Passover meal together. He was preparing them for what is about to happen in the next twenty-four hours. He knows what Judas must do and tells him to go and do it. Then he transforms the Seder meal of the Old Covenant into our Holy Communion of the New Covenant. At the end of this meal they would have sung the Hallel psalms which are Psalm 113-118. Hallel is Hebrew for praise. Jesus and his disciples would have sung these psalms of praise. Psalm 118 was our Call to Worship. As Jesus walked from the Upper Room through the Kidron Valley to the Garden of Gethsemane did the words of the Psalm echo in his mind?

Out of my distress I called on the Lord;  
With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me?

Jesus went to the Garden, but he did not go alone. He took his cadre or his inner circle of disciples, Peter, James, and John. These were the same three who saw his divinity, who experienced his glory with Moses and Elijah on the mountaintop. But this evening they would witness the humanity of Jesus. This evening they would witness Jesus being "sorrowful and troubled." Jesus said that he was "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." Jesus is a dead man walking. His friends will abandon him. He will

be arrested and tortured. And he will be executed in the most brutal, painful way- a crucifixion. Jesus needed someone to be with him. So he asked the three who saw him divinely illuminated, the three in whom he would entrust to continue his mission. He asked them to watch and pray while he went off a little farther to pray. But what did they do? They fell asleep. Well, traditionally there are several glasses of wine consumed during the Seder meals. Perhaps the wine had relaxed them. It was a long day and it was after midnight. "The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak." If Peter, James, and John had known this was their last night with Jesus, they wouldn't have slept. Three times Jesus returns to them and three times they are sleeping. Jesus needed his close friends to be praying with him.

When we are going through troubling times, times of grief, times of anguish, times of uncertainty, anxious times, don't we need someone to just be with us and pray for us? They don't need to say anything. They don't need to give advice or encouragement. We just want someone with us and offer prayers on our behalf. So did Jesus. The Emmanuel, God with us, needed someone to be with him and pray for him. His spirit was willing to face what he was about to face, but his flesh was trying to find another way and he prayed. "Father, take this cup from me, please!"

The divine Jesus had the power to stop his execution. He had the power to wipe the entire Roman Empire and all the religious leaders off the face of the earth. Jesus could have started a whole new religious government and placed himself as the extreme ruler,

but he didn't. Remember he passed this test of the use of his divine power before, when he spent 40 days in the wilderness. This wasn't the type of savior he was to be. So he cries out, "Father, isn't there another way? I'm not ready. There is more that needs to be done here. These three sleepy followers aren't ready to carry this mission forward. Isn't there a plan B?"

I can relate to this human part of Jesus, can you? When we are faced with decisions we don't want to make, when tragedy happens to us, when we get that phone call that we know will change our lives, when someone we love is hurting, when the world seems to be caving in, when we receive a medical diagnosis that will change our lives, when we realize that we are facing the end of our lives, we call out to God, "Take this cup from me!"

At the church where I serve, our Lenten series is called, "Journeying Inward, Journeying Outward: Being and Doing." The inward journey is the "being" or spending time with God in prayer, meditation, reading scriptures for the purpose of not only developing a closer relationship with God in Christ, but also understanding who we are in relationship with God-the vertical part of the cross. The outward journey is the "doing" or the serving and reaching others or the horizontal part of the cross. The inward journey leads us to the outward journey and back again. As I read through the Gospels, I have become aware that Jesus developed a pattern of journeying inward, spending time with his Father, and journeying outward, preaching and healing the people.

When I read this scripture, I witnessed Jesus journeying inward, wrestling with God and himself. After the Seder meal, he could have hung out with the rest of the disciples in the Upper Room, napping until Judas returned. Instead, he chose to go off to be with God, to plead with God, and to face his fears. When we face those devastating, painful times, how do we handle them? Do we find a quiet place to be with God? Do we ask friends to pray with us and for us? Or do we handle these times with a bottle or with pills or with anger or with a gun? Our nation is going through a time when it seems young men who are hurting can only get relief from their pain by picking up a gun and killing many. Jesus took the inward journey to prepare his self for the outward journey to the cross. He sat in that olive garden looking at the hill where he would hang the next day and prayed to his Father. Jesus prayed what he taught us to pray, “not my will, but yours.” We pray this every Sunday, “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

God did not answer Jesus’ prayer the way he wanted it answered. God did not take this cup from Jesus. Instead God helped him accept the cup and drink from it. When Judas brought the soldiers to arrest Jesus, he was ready to face what he knew he had to face to save us and this world. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Amen.

