

Jesus in the Garden

Luke 22:39-46

*This is an adaptation of a sermon originally prepared for Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Burnsville, MN, February 21-22, 2015.
<http://popmn.org/worship/changing-church/>*

There is a story I've seen a number of times about a man named Clarence who had a frog named Felix. Clarence worked at a low paying job, but he had dreams of getting rich, so he decided he would teach Felix the frog to fly. Who wouldn't pay to see a flying frog?

Felix the frog, however, wasn't that excited. "I can't fly, you twit. I'm a frog, not a canary!"

Clarence wasn't impressed. "That negative attitude of yours could be a real problem. We're going to remain poor, and it will be your fault."

So they got to work. Clarence explained that their apartment building had fifteen floors, and that each day Felix would jump out of a window, starting with the first floor and eventually getting to the top floor. After each jump, they would analyze what worked well and tweak the process in preparation for the next floor.

Felix tried his best, but things didn't go too well. THUD!

He tried different strategies, and even tried a cape, but the result was the same. THUD!

On the seventh day, Felix the frog said, "You know you're killing me, don't you?" And that day Felix the frog took one final leap and went to the great lily pad in the sky.

We've just entered into a season of the Church called Lent, a forty day period of preparation for the celebration of Easter. How do we prepare for Easter? How do we prepare ourselves to celebrate, that by God's power, Jesus has flown free from the bonds of sin and

death? We prepare by coming face-to-face with the reality that we cannot fly. Not from sin. Not from death. Not on our own.

We try so hard to love others well, but through our words and actions we leave a trail of relational wreckage behind us, even - or maybe especially with those we claim to love the most.

We try so hard to forgive others well, but our hearts are storehouses of bitterness and well-rehearsed hurts.

We try so hard to appear competent and confident, and yet deep down we all know the truth about ourselves - that we are driven by fear and insecurity, riddled with guilt and mortified by the shame of our failures.

We try so hard to fly, but we fail and we fall. That's our story. That's the truth about us, a truth that we're going to encounter over and over again in the next six weeks as we walk through the biblical story of Jesus' journey to the cross. But along the way we're going to discover that while we're weaker than we'd like to admit, God's grace in Christ is greater than we ever dreamed. We begin the journey with Jesus and the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Jesus and his disciples had just finished their last meal together, celebrating the Passover Feast in the Upper Room.

- At that meal Jesus revealed that one of his beloved disciples would betray him.
- At that meal the disciples argued about who was the greatest among them.
- At that meal Jesus revealed that his dearest friend, Peter, would soon deny knowing him three times.
- In other words, throughout this story Luke is pointing us to the weakness of the disciples. They are frogs; they cannot fly. And I want to suggest to you that that reality stands at the very center of the story of Jesus and the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Luke records that the Garden was a favorite place for Jesus and the disciples, a place they frequented, and on this particular night Jesus wanted to go there to pray.

Notice what happened. Jesus moved more deeply into the garden alone and, revealing his humanity, poured out his anguish and fear before God. Jesus did not want to suffer. He did not want to die. But through prayer he came to a place of submission. He surrendered himself to the journey that he knew lay before him.

But notice the disciples. Jesus asked them to do but one thing: *pray*. Pray that they might not fall into the impending temptation to deny Jesus, abandon him and doubt that he is indeed the Messiah. But the disciples utterly failed. They fell asleep. Not only did they fail to pray but just hours later they failed in the very temptations about which Jesus had warned them. They abandoned him, denied him and doubted him.

Luke, I think, is using this story to prepare us for the Good News of Easter. Like the disciples, we fail. We cannot fly. No matter how hard we try we fall. We fail to love. We fail to forgive. We fail to trust. When tested we are found wanting. That's our story. That's the truth about us. **We are a broken, sinful people.** We are weaker than we would like to admit.

But I think Luke also wants us to know that where we fail, Jesus succeeds. Jesus knows that his disciples will fail him. He knows that they will deny him. But Jesus does not fail them. He does not deny them. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus reveals the very heart of God, that in our inevitable failures we meet the invincible love of God. Our weakness is met by the strength of God's mercy and grace. We get a foretaste of that mercy and grace in the Garden of Gethsemane. We will taste it more fully on Easter morning.

When we make the Christian faith about self-improvement and about trying harder, we prove that we're missing the point of the Gospel. The story of the Garden of Gethsemane is not about disciples who should have tried harder. It's about disciples who can't be other than what they are – broken, sinful human beings.

But the story of the Garden of Gethsemane is also about the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ – a God who knows what we are, loves us as we are and empowers us to be more than we could ever be on our own.

When we make the Christian faith into flying lessons we're kidding ourselves. The Christian faith is not about learning to fly; it's about having faith in the One who has flown free from the bonds of sin and death. It's not about trying; it's about trusting. It's about fully relying on God. FROG

This learning to trust God doesn't come naturally – while we know in our heads that God is a God of love and mercy, there are many places within us that struggle with to trust in God's love and grace.

I don't like to acknowledge that I am weak. I don't like to admit I have fears and insecurities. I don't want to come to terms with my utter inability to fly...my inability to love and forgive others and trust in God's grace. And I don't want you to know about it either. I want you to think of me as wonder woman with my cape on my back, able to fly, able to love and forgive and trust like Jesus.

But that pathway only takes us back to Clarence and Felix the flying frog. Eventually you'll figure out that you can't fly, and that I can't either.

Instead, what if walk together a different pathway, the way of the cross. I can't speak for you but I can tell you that trying to fly and pretending that I can is exhausting. Wouldn't it be awesome to become a community in which we didn't have to try or pretend anymore? To be at peace with who and what we really are, and yet hopeful about what God in Christ is doing in us?

The truth is we are weaker than we'd like to admit, but God's grace in Christ is greater than we ever dreamed. May we try less and trust more. May we die to our illusions of flying so we might live falling again and again into the immeasurable grace and love of God in Christ. May we FROG – Fully rely on God.