

New York Times Columnist and author Thomas Friedman began a recent column with this story: “When I was in Cairo during the Egyptian uprising, I wanted to change hotels one day to be closer to the action and called the Marriott to see if it had any openings. The young-sounding Egyptian woman who spoke with me from the reservations department offered me a room and then asked: ‘Do you have a corporate rate? I said, ‘I don’t know. I work for The New York Times.’ There was a silence on the phone for a few moments, and then she said: ‘Can I ask you something?’ Sure. ‘Are we going to be O.K.? I’m worried.’”¹

I don’t think that was a purely informational question. The young woman speaking had no discernable reason to assume that Friedman had some insight other than simply a journalist’s intuition about how the events of the Egyptian uprising would unfold. No, I think she needed to know that someone heard her fears and shared them with her.

The need to connect when we are in the midst of turmoil is very real. Indeed there is something about our nature as social creatures that compels us to seek common experience, to look for another person who can offer reassurance, however scant, when we are facing trials. There is some great comfort in knowing that another person is there. I can think of no other reason to sit in hospital waiting rooms rather than simply await the news via telephone or text other than to offer the comfort that someone is waiting, that someone knows what is going on.

The act of waiting with another – the act of keeping watch – is a part of what it means to be human, I have come to believe. You know, we are made for communion with God

¹ Friedman, Thomas L. *Pray. Hope. Prepare.* in The New York Times, April 12, 2011.

and with each other... we are made to bear with each other. The more I consider the doctrine of the Trinity, the more I consider how God self-defines, the more I think of what it means to be made in God's image, I conclude that it means to be made for deep relationship with each other.

Think of it: the classic doctrine of the Trinity teaches that God exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (or ghost, it means the same thing). Three persons, one God. The point of the language surrounding the Trinity, by the way, is not to be sexist or imply gender to God, even though father and son are obviously masculine terms and the Greek for Spirit is feminine, the point is to use deeply personal terms to identify what is the nature of God... that God's nature is inherently communal and personal and yet so inseparably bound that God is one. Trinitarian theology can confuse even the most seasoned theologians, so I don't want to press the point too far, but since we are made in the image of God, as Genesis tells us, we need to know what that means. The more I think of it, the more I conclude that to be made in God's image means to be made for deep connection with God and each other.

The Council of Chalcedon, in the fifth century, met to seek to make answer to the deeper Christological questions and controversies of the early church, questions like whether or not Jesus really suffered or whether Jesus just looked like a human being but was really divine and therefore did not experience pain and isolation like we do. In seeking to make answer to the questions about the nature of Jesus, the council issued the creed that Jesus Christ is *fully human, fully God*. Even more controversy immediately ensued, and without causing your eyes to glaze over by giving you the finer points of fifth century Christology, what I want to emphasize is that Jesus knows what it is to need someone to

keep the night watch. Jesus, showing us what it means to be fully human, knew what it is to need deep connection, to need deep solidarity in the face of pain and suffering.

And so on the night of his arrest, Jesus took with him his friends and went into the Garden to pray. And what he asked of his friends was to keep the night watch.

Perhaps I am wrong, but I tend to think that we in the mainline church tend to avoid dwelling on the suffering of Jesus. Perhaps I am wrong, but I have observed that we in the mainline church tend to concentrate more on the teachings of Jesus than the suffering of Jesus. And certainly there is merit to concentrating to on what Jesus taught. Jesus taught us how to live, after all. But I think we want to avoid the blood, frankly.

I think there is something about the physical, crude presentation of Jesus suffering that is repulsive to us. I think of the old blood hymns such as “Are you washed, washed, washed in the blood, blood, blood.” That just doesn’t sound good to me. Worse yet is the old classic, “Are you Covered with the Blood?” It sounds more like describing a murder scene than a church service, though I suppose in a sense it is.

When I was at Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis, I worked with a very fine musician, Mark Riddles, who on a lark, compiled a collection of all of the blood hymns he could find, including such classics as I have just mentioned, mostly old revivalist camp meeting songs. He called it the Hemal Hymnal. It had a red cover. The pastors on the staff were having fun at the expense of some of the worse blood hymns one day when one of our colleagues stopped us cold with the simple observation, “well, there was blood.”

He was right. There was blood. And in that garden, in that garden, Jesus had come to pray because he knew there would be blood. And he asked his friends to keep the night watch with him.

Keeping the night watch is hard work. And Jesus' disciples, his friends, failed at it. Jesus, agitated and grieving over what is to come asks his friends to keep awake with him and to pray. When he returns and finds them sleeping, he asks, "could you not keep awake one hour?"

You see, he was not seeking sentry duty, he was seeking, asking his friends, to keep watch with him, to care enough to take on to themselves some of the suffering and pain and isolation he felt in the moments before his arrest. He was asking them to be with him.

If what it means to be fully human is to live fully in communion with God and with each other, we can't understand fully what Jesus felt. We may understand intellectually that the crucifixion of Jesus, viewed from the vantage point of Trinitarian theology was more than simply the physical pain of death, it was God allowing violence to be done to God's very nature for our sake. God's very definition of self is community; is three persons so inextricably bound, so intertwined that the action of one is the action of all three, so much that the crucifixion of the Son meant that the father and the Spirit were on the cross as well. We can intellectually understand and state these things, but we cannot know the suffering that Jesus anticipated.

He asked his friends to keep the night watch as he prayed that it might not be so. Three times he found his friends sleeping. And when I think of what lay behind them, of Jesus predicting his suffering and death, predicting their failures and betrayals, when I think of

what lay before them, swords drawn and crosses to bear, my sympathies lie with those disciples. Given the choice between agonized praying and sleep, wouldn't I rather close my eyes? Wouldn't you?

Keeping the night watch is hard work. Taking the suffering of another on to ourselves in order to ease their burden is hard work. Sharing suffering is messy, it is painful, and it means risking rejection and failure.

In a wonderful and candid sermon many years ago, a friend I respect very much told her stories of keeping the night watch². She told of how, in a yoked parish when she was newly out of seminary, she answered the door of her manse one night to find a young woman who suffered from mental illness and needed her desperately to keep the night watch with her. She said that she didn't know then that keeping the night watch would mean not one night, but many nights. She didn't know then that keeping the night watch would mean late night phone calls when the erraticalities of medication sent her friend to the edge of death. She didn't know how it would shape her theology to its very core to sit with her friend who would say, "I want to believe all that you are saying about God's love, but how can I believe in a God who loves me when every aspect of my life points not to God's love but to God's absence." And as she preached, she said she wished that she could say that she kept the night watch faithfully, but truthfully, she failed not once, but many times.

Lent is the season of penitence and confession, and I share with you that I, too, know what it means to fail... but I suspect you do too. When I consider a decade of ministry, with all of its incumbent joy, the moments that pain me are the moments when I was

² The Rev. Dr. Nora Tubbs Tisdale, Untitled Lenten Sermon from Miller Chapel, Princeton Theological Seminary

asked to keep the night watch and I failed. But who am I telling? You know what it is like to keep the night watch...

And when I consider that the invitation to keep the night watch is an invitation to failure, my sympathies lie even more with these disciples than I can say.

Palm Sunday is such a weird day. We show up at church in nice clothes, we wave around palm branches and commemorate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, where the people came out and celebrated his arrival. Who knows what brought about the celebration...

everyone tends to come out of the woodwork when there is a parade, but very few want to sweep up the broken glass after the carnival. We show up, sing triumphal hymns and somewhere in the course of the service we have to abruptly switch gears and prepare ourselves to think about the events of the passion, the events of Holy week such that we are ready to return for Easter because we have taken the time to understand in whatever way we are able the enormity of death. A friend of mine was driving home after church with her nine year old son a couple of years ago, and he began to run through the events of the day... the palm branches, the donkey, All Glory, Laud and Honor... and he said to his mother, "So, on Sunday, they loved Jesus, right?"

"Yes," she replied.

"Then on Thursday they wanted to kill him, right."

"That's right." She answered.

He thought a moment, then he mused, "hmmmm... tough town!"

Tough town indeed. Tough times... As my friend preached her sermon, she offered the observation that unlike the disciples who were asked to keep the night watch with the holy, sinless, blameless Jesus, we are asked to keep watch under very different

circumstances. We are asked to keep the night watch for people who ought to know better, people who probably made their own messes in some circumstances. We are asked to be willing to bear on ourselves some of the hardship of people whom we frankly may not even like very much. We are asked to keep the night watch for people who may have hurt us or may not like us very much. We are asked to do the hard work of being who God created us to be.

Perhaps it isn't quite so odd to think that one day we celebrated Jesus' arrival and four short days later we were ready to be done with it. Keeping the night watch is hard work. But when we keep the night watch, we are closest to the humanity for which God created us.

Considering the enormity of what our task entails, it would be very easy to lose hope, to determine the whole endeavor is a fool's errand. Worse, we could turn instead to a cheap grace that suggests that because Jesus has already done all that needs to be done for us and for our salvation that we can rest easily, covered in the blood, as it were, and not be bothered with the hard work of keeping watch with each other. It would be easy to abandon hope to platitude and give in to the tough town in tough times.

But bear this in mind: our hope does not lie in the fact that we are able to remain always faithful to Jesus. We will not. We will fail. Our hope lies rather that Jesus, who remained faithful to the end, will *always* be faithful to us.

And so it is that we can keep the night watch. And so it is that we can face the tough town.

Palm Sunday is such a weird day... we've come to prepare ourselves for Easter and so we go from celebration to sorrow in less than an hour. Even we stiff-upper-lip, don't-

show-too much-emotion, keep-the-blood-away-from-me mainline Presbyterians are confronted with the cross at Holy Week.

And confronted with the cross, we are told to keep the night watch for Jesus by keeping the night watch for the other, even in the tough town that promises tough times to Jesus and to those who follow him.

What wondrous love is this, O my soul? What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord of Bliss to bear the heavy cross for *my* soul, and *yours*. What wondrous love is this?

Easter is coming. But there is a cross that stands between now and then. Will you keep watch?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.