

Readings:

Genesis 32:22-31

Luke 18:1-8

Persistent Practice

This morning Our gospel begins. “Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to loose heart.” While our Hebrew bible passage claims the naming of Jacob as Israel because he has wrestled with God and prevailed.

Persistent striving for and encounter with the holy seems to be the theme of the day. Interestingly enough just this week I entered into a persistent spiritual practice challenge with a group of colleagues. Yes, believe it or not even clergy can struggle with finding time for regular spiritual practice. We tend to be very good at spending time reading and studying for sermons, praying for others, setting up spiritual encounters for others to attend but at the end of the day many of us will admit that we find it hard to squeeze in a solitary practice of our own.

This spiritual practice challenge began with a group of clergy and BC conference staff that form a Spiritual Care Network team for clergy. As a team we meet every few months and see who it is that might need some extra care as well as try to develop ways to provide that care before it comes to a time of crisis. Recently as a team we discerned together a need to get more intentional about encouraging one another to spend time with God. And so on Thanksgiving day we began our 40 day challenge. Each of us is to spend at least a half hour in a chosen spiritual practice each day. We are to consider it the priority of the time even when others may feel we should be doing something ‘more productive.’ Each day we have been blogging with one another about our practice for a way to keep accountability.

Most of us admitted that the challenge was hard to begin - Thanksgiving day - really? Is that not busy enough already? And then on the Tuesday back I know I was up prepping for a meeting at six am. and my day didn't finish until 9 - how am I supposed to squeeze in time with God? Fortunately I managed to sneak in a yoga class which meant that I could check that off the list as my spiritual practice of the day. And then the next day the sun shone brightly and a few meeting got cancelled so I snuck away from the office for a prayer walk (feeling guilty that I should be really working).

And yet what happened was I found my pace slowing - my intention deepening - my care for self and others strengthened. Now it just happens that a few of us from the Spiritual Care Network are also attending the “Sowing Promise, Growing Leaders” course this next week. And guess what - in prep for this we have all been asked to spend time in intentional spiritual practice with a focus on leadership each day this week. Although I could have ‘killed two birds with one stone’ as they say. (Rather a violent idiom when referring to spiritual practice but you get the idea). I chose instead to spend an intentional hour in prayer, reading and other forms of spiritual

practice each day. Now the result has not been unending days of epiphanies but it has reminded me of the necessity of spending time with the holy. I have found my spirit to be lighter, my work load seems to even be more manageable - although still full. And I was reminded of where the heart of who I am and the work I do lies.

When I spend time in prayer, meditation and reflection I am much more aware of what I am wrestling with, and what I live in gratitude for. One author wrote "Sometimes it is only in retrospect that I realize I have persevered at something. Usually I am too busy doing what I have to do in the moment. But when given the opportunity for reflection, I find that I've made progress through all sorts of struggles and wrestlings to better myself in one way or the other."

It seems to me the message of today is not that if you just pray about it life will be easy. Rather it is pray without ceasing, with persistence. In our parable it is a persistent widow - a person who is vulnerable, alone, defenseless, and culturally insignificant who with her persistence and steady search for justice changes the powerful. It is Jacob who triumphs in a wrestle with God because he is blessed and prevails. New life is found for the widow, Jacob and even for God who blesses Jacob.

Sometimes life and faith can feel like a wrestling match and yet like the widow and Jacob we are not to be content until we receive a blessing.

How can we expect to be changed, to become more fully alive, to trust God more, to understand holy wisdom and justice if we are not willing to spend the time seeking it, basking in it, relating with our God. I honestly believe prayer is more about changing us, centering us, blessing us than it is about changing God. It is about aligning ourselves with the holy in a way that our connection deepens and we become more aware of ourselves, others and the world.

In the weeks to come I will continue to share with you my spiritual practice journey. We will likely be asking others to join us in Advent for a practice with others. I was thinking it would be blessing for us as a community to take this advent challenge together. If you have a spiritual practice that you would be willing to share with others come speak with me and we will begin to set up a program.

In the meantime let me encourage you in the joys, concerns, wrestles, injustices, and celebrations of life to pray without ceasing - to bring your homesick soul home to the place God calls you in constant holy presence.