

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Matthew 22:15-22

Isaiah 45:1-7

Psalms 96:1-13

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

October 18, 2020

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

---

Every Friday this fall I am taking part in a clergy group for spiritual formation. It's a group that recognizes that if we are going to lead others spiritually, we first need to be seeking our own spiritual grounding. In other words, you can't teach what you don't practice.

This seems obvious enough. You would think as clergy, we have the spiritual thing all figured out. But, the reality is that we are just as depleted as each and every one of you. We are just as confused about the world we are living in. We are just as worn out and uncertain about the future. And with that in mind, when I sit down to write my sermon each week, I don't always have rosy thoughts or interesting wisdom or clever observations. Sometimes, like this week...I can only come up with some hard truths.

So, I thought it fitting to start with this acknowledgement...my spiritual life is suffering. And, it's not because I have lost faith in God. It's not because I am feeling disconnected from the church. There has been no struggle with faith. Instead, I might characterize what I am experiencing as the loss of practice. When our world turns upside down so often do we feel the same thing happening to the things we hold most dear.

The spiritual life, if it is anything, is meant to be a practice, a practice of coming back over and over to God especially at those times when we need God the most. It's the practice of putting our lives in God's hands on a daily basis and opening our hearts to feel God's movement in our very being. But, and maybe you can relate, my soul is tired and so am I and as a result, my spiritual life has taken a hit. My practice hasn't been so good. It has turned upside down.

And as we talked about this common feeling among us in my clergy group this week, we also recognized that this is no time to let our spiritual lives be ignored. Our struggle does not have to turn into stagnation. We can turn things right side up.

We don't have the luxury of stagnation right now. Not to state the obvious...but the world is really troubled. We are a divided nation. The challenges in front of all of us are daunting. From COVID, to the upcoming election, to how we are supposed to educate our children, to what our future will look like, to what we believe and who we believe. We are drawing our dividing lines in cement and we are putting up walls, locking out any perspective that we don't want to hear. No wonder our souls are depleted. Instead of drawing closer to one another, we are drawing farther away.

Folks, if we have ever needed spiritual grounding it's now. If we ever needed the energy and the encouragement of the Holy Spirit it is now. Yes, we are tired but God calls us forth in the midst of times such as these to be a light in the midst of the darkness. To lift up the suffering.

To comfort the weak. To speak out against hate. To stand up against greed. And in order to do that, we need to be strong in our faith.

When we are grounded in our spiritual life...we begin to seek solutions. We begin to look deeper into our faith for answers and direction when we feel defeated and the world feels so broken. Because we know in our hearts that we cannot move forward alone. This is a bigger project than anyone can do on their own and we especially can't build a beloved community without centering our hearts on God.

So when you feel tired, when you feel depleted, when you feel empty of the Spirit...I want you to remember that right in that moment, God is lifting you up for a greater purpose and a renewed strength to live your life of faith because this world needs you.

Practice is hard. Some days we don't want to do it. Some days we will find every excuse in the book to procrastinate and put the work off until another day. But, if we want to come out on the other side of the division we are facing...we must practice...every single day. We must practice loving our neighbor. We must practice compassion. We must practice justice. We must practice mercy. And, we must practice keeping our hearts open to the Holy Spirit.

Jesus, in our Gospel reading, reflects on this very type of practice. We might describe his encounter with the Pharisees as a discourse on the push / pull between our spiritual lives and our secular lives. Between our communal and our personal commitments. We are continually having to balance to whom we answer. Yes...we live in a secular society with secular commitments. Those secular commitments aren't bad but they aren't God. Jesus pushes the Pharisees and pushes us to consider...in any situation we find ourselves, what ultimately belongs to God? Our actions? Our words? Our emotions? Our possessions?

Jesus teaches that our spiritual practice must bring us back to these questions day in and day out so that we are the people of faith God desires us to be. Debi Thomas says it so well...it's the, "the language we use or abuse, the stories we privilege or silence, the people we protect or oppress, the sins we confess or indulge, the truths we proclaim or deny — these make all the difference in the world."

So when we practice, we learn that our spiritual lives are not distinct from our secular commitments. Both are a part of our lives but only one provides the depth of being that we long to achieve. Only one will sustain us through times such as these. Only one will repair our deeply divided and broken world.

Michael Joseph Brown, president of Payne Theological Seminary, writing on our text from 1 Thessalonians says that the apostle Paul, "reminds us indirectly that human beings can only experience the fullness of their humanity when they are in deep, trusting relationship with one another. Even more, this relationship has more depth when it is experienced along with God."

This is the culmination of practice. We must be grounded in God. We must be grounded in relationship with one another. In the language we use, in the stories we uplift, in the people we protect, in the sins we confess, in the truths we proclaim. We can make a difference. God needs us to make a difference.

So let me challenge you with this...dig deep into your spiritual grounding this week. Practice listening to God. Practice being in good and honest relationship with one another. Practice living the life Jesus taught you to live.

Thanks be to God. Amen.