

Sermon for the 22nd Sunday in Pentecost Season
Scarborough
Rev David Howells

Grace Church in
Date 2013.10.20

“Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us “the beloved”. Being the beloved is the core truth of our existence” Henri Nouwen.

That quote is good to hold in your head as you look at the Gospel story of the persistent woman and the unjust judge.

This is, Jesus says, a teaching about persevering in prayer. So I invite you to think about what you have been praying for for a very long time. I keep a journal daily, and I keep a spiritual journal erratically. Journal keeping is a good spiritual practice because it allows you to notice long-term trends. My daily journal is a ten year diary. Each progressive year, every day, you get to look back and see what was happening at the same time, and how you felt about it. To Lucy’s amusement I repeatedly record being tired! My mother once said I was often tired as a small child. So tiredness is an ongoing “normal” for me.

My *spiritual* journal is more interesting since it is generally about what I am working on in my relationship with God. The same tensions appear quite regularly, the same problems arise, the same hopes and fears recur.

This sounds a bit hopeless, but actually what is interesting and encouraging is that each time something recurs it is there, but subtly changed.

I pray repeatedly about the same things. It is perseverance, which I would not notice if I did not keep track, and if I did not go regularly to see a spiritual director.

The things I pray about are probably not unlike the things that you do to. Things like uncertainty about some relationships, questions about self-worth, frustrations about old habits and attitudes not going away fast enough. I cannot say that I compose prayers about these things, it is more that when I sit still and linger intentionally in the presence of God these are the things that surface, once I have chased away the thoughts about shopping, trouble-shooting, and the puzzles of the day which need solutions. Going deeper into myself, and trying to open each layer to God. That for me is prayer. Not shopping lists of good ideas that God might not have thought of himself, or my suggestions for better management of the world. No. Prayer is the opening of your heart and soul. It is opening the door and allowing God, like a friendly cat, to stroll in and look into the corners of your inner self. Prayer is not always comfortable.

This sounds so unlike the relationship between the woman and the judge. She nags and he digs in his heels. This goes on and on. Finally he is so frustrated by her that he gives in to get rid of her. Jesus tells us elsewhere (see Matthew 6;7) that battering at God with lots of words is not how it is done. Usually Jesus tells stories and begins “God is like this....” This parable should start of, “I’ll tell you what God is *not* like!....” God is not like a bored civil servant. God is not like a judge who only responds to bribes or to endless repeated appeals. God is not like the City Planning Department, so overloaded with building permit requests that you wished they did accept bribes to speed yours up!

God wants to hear your prayers. They’re like the phone calls to a parent from a far away child. You stop what you are doing when your auntie or cousin calls from far away. God is eager to have you talk to him. Because God does not see you as another client, another inconvenient case, another

irritant. God sees you as the beloved. God sees you as his son, as his wonderful daughter. We are children of the Father. We are loved beyond measure.

The woman, angry with her opponent, wants justice, or at least her version of it.

We come, really, looking for healing. My prayers are really all about healing.

We all come from our families with damage. Our parents do the very best they can with the resources they have. But often they pass on the damage they have carried and they cannot defend us from the wear and tear of childhood, school and society. Our souls have scar tissue, pulled muscles and deformed joints. We walk, in the spirit, as it were, with a limp, with pain at times, and with tiredness.

When we come with anger or demands or a very clear definition of what we expect God to do for us, we are as far from praying as the judge is from the real personality of God. This little story of Jesus is a “counter parable” where everything is the opposite of the relationship of the beloved with the lover. She is wrong and he is wrong! Jesus is saying, get this kind of relationship out of your head! Sadly, many people who do not believe in God do not believe in “God the Judge”, or “God the person running the machine” or “God the Policeman”. Jesus wants us to introduce people to “God who looks at you as the object of his love”.

So why should we pray persistently?

Perhaps it is because we want God to help us break through. Break through the damage in our souls. Break through the walls we have built to protect ourselves. Break down the disguises we hide behind in case people don't like who we actually are. Break out of the ruts we have fallen into. Break out of the inner castles we built which have become our spiritual prisons. Break out of the armour that makes us unable to be touched in love. Break through so we can be free in Christ, to be children again, soft, loveable, playful, unselfconscious and delighted. “Unless,” Jesus said, “you become childlike again, you cannot even see the kingdom of heaven, let alone enter it!”

It is the foundation of the faith that Jesus calls us to: to know that we are loved. That is the starting point. It is this being loved which drives out the fear.

Many people believe that my journey of discipleship begins when I confess my love for God. This is a mistake! My journey of discipleship begins when I confess God's love for me.

Taking that knowledge of being loved, going layer by layer, deeper and deeper into your soul, your heart, your mind, your life, is what heals and transforms. That long and gentle process proceeds with constant prayer.

It is a process, often frustratingly slow, which is perseverance in prayer. It is a journey deeply into love. It makes you Christ-like.

This sermon owes much to the wisdom of the Wednesday Bible Study Group, to the Scripture Union commentary Betty McLeod lent me and to the insights of my friend Caroline.