

Daily Work

My mother-in-law grew up on the south side of Chicago, back when it was full of ethnic neighborhoods. Her parents had come to this country as small children, so they were practical, hard-working, no-nonsense people. When my mother-in-law as a young girl expressed interest in learning how to play the piano, her mother found a teacher and took her to her lesson. When she got home after that first lesson, her mother said, “Okay, now play something for me.” Of course, she couldn’t. Her mother got angry and said, “I paid good money for you to learn how to play the piano. If you can’t do it, I’m not paying for another lesson.”

This story is funny because we all know that one doesn’t learn something as complex as playing the piano in one lesson – well, *most* of us know that. To do anything well, and some things at all, we have to put in a lot of practice, whether it’s golf, horseback riding, or making music. Some things require having a basic skill to begin with – it’s hard to ride a bicycle without a good sense of balance. But what makes us better in anything is the willingness and drive to keep at it. That’s why there are putting greens and driving ranges. That’s why equestrians spend a lot of time on the back of a horse. That’s why music schools have so many practice rooms. As a friend of mine puts it, a little a lot is better than a lot a little. What he means is that a little done on a regular basis has more effect than a big effort every once in a while.

We know that about improving our work and our leisure activities. Why do we forget it when it comes to our spirituality? Why do we think that going to church for an hour a week – or every other week, or once a month – is sufficient to keep our spiritual lives healthy? How is it that people pay for a gym membership and get up at oh-dark-thirty to work out, but can’t find the time to spend a few free minutes each day to connect with their inner lives?

I’m really not trying to make you feel guilty. I’m just ruminating, thinking about the wonderful rededication service we had here a week ago. On that Sunday I could feel the deep love for one another and this place as we renewed our commitment to Jesus Christ and to each other. For some it was a mountaintop experience. I heard “I don’t want this to end,” just like Peter when he saw Jesus with Moses and Elijah on the mountain. But that ended, and so did our rededication service. Now it is a week later. How do we come down the mountain and reenter daily life?

When Jesus and Peter and James and John came down from the mountain, they found the rest of the disciples squabbling. That sure sounds like daily life. Jesus had to teach his followers all over again how to pray and do the things that would enlarge their hearts. In today’s Gospel we heard some of the fruit of those daily routines he taught them. The disciples had spent months watching Jesus teach, preach, and cure the sick, doing it all with compassion. Then Jesus said, “Okay, now it’s your turn. You’ve been watching me. Now I’m sending you out to do the same thing. You are to proclaim, cure, cleanse, and cast out. And to keep you from thinking it’s all your doing, don’t take a thing with you. You’re going to have to rely entirely on God.”

And so out they went. In Luke’s telling of the story, they came back rejoicing in all that they had accomplished. Not so in Matthew, where Jesus heaps on warnings that they will be rejected and persecuted, so many warnings that we’ll hear even more of them next week. If this is what the life of faith is going to be like, no wonder we only want to experience it for an hour once a week!

But we know that in this country we won't be persecuted for being Christian, unlike parts of the world where Christians do die for their faith. We pray for them, that they may know the love of Christ and the comfort of the Holy Spirit in their distress, just as we pray for those who suffer from any kind of violence or tragedy.

Today's list of what can go wrong is so long that it's easy to overlook what Jesus provides for the journey: power and authority. Power is given to proclaim the good news. Authority is given to cure the sick and cast out demons. To put that in modern terms, Jesus gives us power to live lives that reveal God's kingdom to the world, and he gives us authority to confront evil in all of its forms. Last Sunday Miroslav Volf said that the mother of all temptations is to live as though human beings live by bread alone. When we live by bread alone, he said, someone always goes hungry, and every taste is bitter.

Volf also made the startling suggestion to think of the urge to go shopping as prayer. It took me a minute to figure out what he meant, but I think it was this: when we want to buy something because we think it will give us happiness, or at least make us feel better, we are responding to a desire for joy deep within us. Recognize *that* desire, Volf says, because that deep desire is the one that will give meaning to your life, not the purchased object itself. It is the desire for God.

And that takes me back to finding God in daily life after coming down from the mountain. If the urge to go shopping can be thought of as prayer, then anything can be prayer. God can be found in anything. Intellectually we know that, but it takes a habit of deliberately turning toward God throughout the day to keep it in front of us. I am so glad that Michelle Crouch's class this summer is focused on faith and work, because it intentionally connects Sunday with the rest of the week. As she engages us over the next ten weeks or so we will begin to understand what Miroslav Volf was getting at.

My mother-in-law's experience with piano lessons – or piano *lesson* – undoubtedly gave her a reason to encourage Raisin when she wanted take lessons as a child. Making music is one of God's gifts to humankind. Having faith in Jesus Christ is an even bigger gift, one that takes as much thoughtfulness and practice as playing an instrument. Even if you aren't musical, you still know how to build up your faith. Spend a few minutes a day reading the Bible. If you don't know what to read, pick up a copy of *Forward Day by Day* and follow its suggestions. Take home the Sunday bulletin and read through the lessons once again each day. Use short prayers throughout the day. The writer Anne Lamott says that all prayer is basically three words: Help. Thanks. Wow. I can add a couple of prayers from my own experience: God, what are you thinking? You want me to do what?

You can do this. A little a lot is better than a lot a little. God has given you the power and authority to do it. Why wait?

[Pentecost 2, Proper 6: Matthew 9:35-10:23.]