

October 16, 2022

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Jeremiah 31:27-34    2 Timothy 3:14-4:5    Luke 18:1-8

“By the Book”

1. If someone asks me if I play golf, I usually reply with something like “Well, I pretend to play golf”
  - a. I picked up the game in my 30s, having never held a club before then
    - i. I inherited some hand me down clubs and took a few lessons
    - ii. I started played at public courses near me in St. Anne.
  - b. Even if you don’t play the game, you can appreciate it has some complexity
    - i. There are so many moving parts to it
    - ii. You’re basically swinging a long stick with a funny head to hit a little white ball which will mock you in the air all the way until it comes to rest not at all where you intended it to end up.
    - iii. Well, at least the way I hit it.
  - c. Which brings me to another image of me playing golf.
    - i. Sometimes, to my surprise, I hit it and it is like I know what I’m doing!
    - ii. The ball goes where it should go!
    - iii. It’s so much about muscle memory and about consistency (and luck, let’s be honest) which is why I say that I both remember and forget and remember again how to play the game within the span of a round.
    - iv. It is that muscle memory, maybe going back to lessons I have taken, reiterated by a practice swing, it’s that muscle memory which allows that repetitive action to feel like a part of me.
    - v. And a good shot will keep me coming back more so than a bad round would keep me away from the course.
2. One could say today’s passages are about muscle memory, a kind of spiritual muscle memory
  - a. A few Sundays ago we talked about faith as a gift from God, and this reflection is along those lines.
    - i. Only here, besides faith being a gift, is the covenant God makes with us which represents a gift, an unearned gift coming from a gracious God to us
  - b. In the Jeremiah passage that spiritual muscle memory is expressed as God writing God’s law in our hearts as a sign of the existing covenant, renewed.
    - i. We have been reading through parts of Jeremiah, so let me review key points
    - ii. The prophet Jeremiah had proclaimed God’s judgement against God’s people for their sinfulness, for turning away from God

- iii. Babylon had conquered the land of Judah, destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, and sent into exile many of its inhabitants
  - iv. Then Jeremiah writes them that God will show them grace in exile, and urges them to seek the wellbeing of the city where their captors had taken them
  - v. And, in today's passage, God outlines a new beginning, a new covenant
  - vi. You'll remember that God had given laws to the people (Moses went up mount Sinai and received them, and came with tablets to share with the people)
  - vii. Well, because of their disobedience, God was taking a new tack: the law would be written not on tablets, but directly on the hearts of people
  - viii. Not new laws. Same laws. But now deep within them, not external to them
  - ix. The covenant was ratified then not by a contract on paper or chiseled tablets, but by hearts which KNOW what the terms of the relationship are
  - x. Call it our Spiritual DNA. Call it being created in God's image. Call it spiritual muscle memory to do what God guides us to do.
  - xi. So much so would it be a part of us, that the day would come when we wouldn't need to teach anyone about God, but all would know (and follow) God, a forgiving and gracious God who frees us from sin.
- c. Then in Timothy that spiritual muscle memory is about the desire and wisdom of returning again and again to the scriptures.
- i. Timothy had grown in the faith following the example of his mom and grandma
  - ii. Paul encourages Timothy to rely on that spiritual muscle memory of doing what is right, and continue learning from the scriptures, which he read and knew
  - iii. Here Paul makes the case that those scriptures are the way to stay connected to God – which though they're external writing on a piece of paper they link us to the God who has written the law in our hearts
- d. And finally in the Gospel the spiritual muscle memory is about the relentless fight for justice as exemplified by a widow pleading her case.
- i. Commentators Reid and Matthews urge us not to get distracted by trying to make this parable solely about prayer, because we may miss a lesson in plain sight.
  - ii. The story points to the multiple injustices of a widow who is being hurt and who has no one to advocate for her, and of a terrible, corrupt judge (and likely court system)
    - 1. The law (written in our hearts, remember?) says that we are to take care of widows and orphans

2. To hear the story of a widow who has to go by herself to court means she's not being supported (or she's bringing a case against her caregiver, which is the even more troubling!)
  3. The point is that she is forced to fight for herself
  4. Her agency, her determination do not erase the fact that from the perspective of the culture of the time she was vulnerable, though in this story she is fighting with all she's got
  5. Then we have a judge who is quite the prince. He doesn't care about God or about other people. What's he doing in that job then? Probably getting bribes for doing his job
  6. And he would not care were it not for this persistent widow he can't get rid of. He's tired with all the work she's making for him, and as Reid and Matthews translate the passage, he's afraid she'll give him a black eye. Literally.
- iii. The story is a parable, but one assumes that it isn't far from a real situation
1. One lesson the gospel writer wants to give us that God is much more accessible and attentive than this mean judge, so please approach God for justice with confidence and hope
  2. The second lesson, however, is that seeking justice (and standing by those who are pleading for justice) is part of what it means to be the people of God.
  3. That's one of the spiritual muscles to work out: seeking justice, and we're assured that God is on our side as we do that.
3. Some of us here came to faith at an early age. Some of us here came to faith as adults. But all of us has come to realize the kind of spiritual muscle memory which longs to be put into practice.
- a. We come to church to give God thanks, to pray, to meditate on the word, to worship with singing and gorgeous music.
  - b. And whether at church, at work or at home, we have the opportunity to let that deep spiritual connection God has with us shine brightly in our actions every day, every moment
  - c. We know deep down, don't we, when God is underlining part of that writing on our hearts, and saying: "Let me read this one to you again..." That is to say, we know where God is leading us when it comes to doing what is consistent with the Realm of God.
  - d. Sure, there are times when we're not sure, but we get to talk with other people of faith, and together we get to read that writing in our hearts, and we find ourselves closer to that guidance from God.
  - e. Or maybe that's what we do here in church also: exercise that spiritual muscle memory. Maybe we come here to take a practice swing, to feel the reassurance

(or the challenge) of God's direction, and then we get to go out there and take the courageous, faithful actions God guides us to.

4. God is gracious and forgiving, always teaching, always guiding us. The scriptures remind us God is busy writing on our hearts, calling us towards that spiritual muscle memory, so we are able to naturally live faithful and courageous lives.

Sources:

*Wisdom Commentary. Luke 10-24* by Barbara E Reid, OP and Shelly Matthews

*Interpreter's Bible. Jeremiah.*

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-29-3/commentary-on-luke-181-8-5>

Reflection questions

1. Share an early memory when you became aware of God in your life or in creation.
2. What does it mean to you personally that Jeremiah says God's law is written in our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33)?
3. Where do you feel God calling you to be that persistent widow fighting injustice? Why?

