

## **Change & Persistence are Important for Spiritual Growth**

For all of us, change can be very difficult. We get set in certain patterns and routines, and there can be a bit of comfort in familiarity. But deep down, we all know changes come whether we like them or not. And very often from change, growth can emerge.

Last week on Monday at our daily Mass, we had the reading from John 12 where Jesus says “unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.” And this weekend, we have the Gospel from Matthew 15 which is rather troubling at first: a woman comes to Jesus and asks for help, for her daughter is tormented by a demon. Jesus first says nothing, then says that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel, and then when she persists, His response is that it’s not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs, and then when she persists further, He says that her faith is so great, let it be done for you as you wish.

What these stories remind us of are two very important things for our spiritual journey, namely being open to change, and persisting in our actions once we determine the change that is necessary.

With respect to change, we ask ourselves what are some things that need to be different in our lives?

For some, it might be possessions. We fill our lives with stuff, but as the saying goes there is never a U-Haul in a funeral possession. Do we have a proper balance on our “stuff” or does it control us? Do we pursue materialism too much? Do we need to maybe be more generous in what we give to the poor and those in need?

For others, it might be relationships. All relationships need change at various points. In marriage, we ask is there enough communication? Am I becoming expectant of my spouse or taking advantage of them? Do I do my fair share around the house and with the kids? Am I being sensitive to the needs of my spouse? Do I need to challenge my spouse to change? Is a relationship or friendship becoming toxic to the point where the other person is causing me to become a person I don’t want to become? Or for parents, can you let go or are you the “helicopter parent” who wants to control your children even as they age, or are you able to let go and let your children as they grow make their own decisions and become adults? For kids, do you realize that as we age, it’s important to remember money doesn’t grow on trees, and to help out parents or with household chores?

How about your relationship with yourself, in particular your past? Do you have a good self-worth? Do you love yourself? Are you able to forgive yourself as God forgives you? Sometimes we can’t change because we cling to the past too much, and the past can make us fearful of making future mistakes, afraid to take risks, or the shame can be crippling.

How about with where God wants you to go? It was a difficult decision for me to go to seminary as the date got closer. I had a part time job I enjoyed, I was just done with my undergraduate degree, and it was such a commitment - six years - that I was looking at. I nearly didn't go in the fall of 2001. But I calmed down after calling the seminary and getting a voice mail three times when I was thinking I wasn't going to go, and sure enough God's plan was for me to go that fall. I'm glad I did. We can do many things through free will, but we won't be truly at peace unless we are following God's plan. So listen to what God has planned for you and carry it out.

That leads us to the persistence part. This week's Gospel is tough because Jesus sounds pretty cold. He ignores the woman, then says something that would be considered very un-Minnesotan, it isn't right to take the food of children and throw it to the dogs. Surely we'd talk about Him in hushed tones after he left the room of course. But He is not trying to be mean to the woman. Rather, what's going on is He's helping her to grow as a person. He likely recognizes her faith, but tests her a bit. And she knows that Jesus can help her, of this she is sure, and she is not going to back down. And because she does not back down and persists, her daughter is healed.

It's a great Gospel illustrating how, as Ringo Starr might say, it don't come easy. We have to persist at achieving God's plans for us once we receive them. Seminary took work and commitment, but I'm still trying to grow as a priest and as a Christian in holiness in overcoming sins and becoming a better man. So how about for you? From parenting and becoming better and working at it even when your children no matter what age are driving you crazy, to working to make others better, or helping the parish to move forward, or making this world a better place, all of us have a job to do. Jesus loves this woman in the Gospel, but He also wants her to make the move in her faith and she does it by not giving up. Neither can we when life gets hard at home or work, or it seems people we love aren't living out the faith, or the world just seems to be falling apart. Remember last week, Elijah didn't remain in the cave, and neither can we.

God has plans for each of us, and while they are all different, what they all share in common is this, namely if we listen to God, and persist in carrying out those plans, and are open to doing it His way and not our own through changing and growing as people, they will ultimately bring us and so many others we encounter along the way happiness. So listen to the words of the Good Shepherd, and do not be afraid of failing along the way or too stubborn to do it His way. Because when we carry out His plan and grow in our faith through being open to change and not giving up, ultimately it will truly lead to a joy and happiness we can't even begin to fathom.

God bless!

Fr. Paul