

Sermon 7 November 2010
2 Thessalonians 2, Haggai 2

How has your week been?

Just in our community there have been several deaths — Paul Free and Russell Judd's dad. Bruce Barnes and Bruce Pratt and Bob Arthur and others are recovering from operations. The Shelleys have a new grand child...

Some are struggling with health, life, relationships, faith. Others are excited and growing.

The invitation from our readings is, whatever our circumstances, to turn to God, FULFIL our purpose, and hang in there; keep faithful, and care for each other.

This week I have been leading a clergy retreat in SA for the Diocese of Willochra. It has been a humbling and encouraging experience.

On my wedding anniversary — 28 September — the eve of the feast of St Michael and All Angels, my partner Nikolai, and I went for a drive in the country. We drove past acres and acres of bright yellow and deep green patch worked pastures — a feast for the eyes. The canola flowers were vibrant. The sorghum flowers were healthy. This was a sight not seen in such richness for many years. This year it has rained; good soaking rain, at the right time. This year the farmers may reap a good harvest; after so many years of drought. (If it stops raining for a bit and if the locusts don't come.)

The farmer prepares the soil, plants the seed — then waits. (1 Cor 3: 5–8) That is all that can be done — wait.

So too with prayer, with our ministry. We do the preparation, turn up — then wait.

There are seasons of abundance, blessing, grace; and there are seasons of dearth, where life is tough and it is hard to hold on. The invitation to the farmer, and us, is to remain faithful. To turn up, to pray, to minister, to be, to wait on God.

Sure — to do all the preparation; to read, see our spiritual director, talk with friends, loosen the soil — then wait — watching — rainfall.

In 'When the Heart Waits', Sue Monk Kidd writes, "waiting prayer... has little to do with petition and intercession and getting God to fix things (though there can be important kinds of prayer). Waiting prayer is different. Author and Presbyterian Minister Eugene Peterson, was quoted in an interview as saying 'The assumption of spirituality is that always God is doing something before I know it. So the task is not to get God to do something I think needs to be done, but to become aware of what God is doing so that I can respond to it and participate and take delight in it.'

This is the motivation behind waiting prayer. We place ourselves in postures of the heart, in the stillness that enables us to become aware of what God is doing so that we can gradually say yes to it with our whole being."

Sue Monk Kidd also writes (When the Heart Waits p143–144):

One afternoon as the children watched television and I folded laundry, we heard a terrible thud against the patio door. I turned in time to see blue

wings falling to the ground. A bird had flown into the glass.

None of us said a word. We looked at one another and crept to the door. The children followed me outside. I half expected the bird to be dead, but she wasn't. She was stunned and her right wing was a little lopsided, but it didn't look broken — bruised maybe.

The bird sat perfectly still, her eyes tiny and afraid. She looked so fragile and alone that I sat down beside her. I reached out my little finger and brushed her wing.

A voice came from behind me. "Why doesn't it fly off Mama?"

"She's hurt", I said. "She just needs to be still." We watched her. We watched her stillness. Finally the children wandered back to the television, satisfied that nothing was going to 'happen' for awhile. But I couldn't leave her.

I sat beside her, unable to resist the feeling that we shared something, the two of us. The wounds and brokenness of life. Crumpled wings. A collision with something harsh and real. I felt like crying for her — for myself — for every broken thing in the world.

That moment taught me... we need to share our stillness. The bird taught me anew that we're all in this together, that we need to sit in one another's stillness and take up corporate postures of prayer. How wonderful it is when we can be honest and free enough to say to one another, "I need you to wait with me" or "Would you like me to wait with you?"

I studied the bird, deeply impressed that she seemed to know instinctively that in stillness is healing. I had been learning that too, learning that stillness can be the prayer that transforms us. How much more concentrated our stillness becomes though when it is shared.

The door opened again. "Is she finished being still yet?" Ann asked.

"No, not yet", I said, knowing that I was talking as much about myself as the bird. We went on waiting together; twenty minutes, thirty, fifty.

Finally she was finished being still. She cocked her head to one side, lifted her wings, and flew.

The sight of her flying made me catch my breath. From the corner of my eye I saw her shadow move along the ground and cross over me. Grace is everywhere, I thought. Then I picked myself up and went back to folding laundry.

After that day, when I needed someone to pray with me I called on one of my friends and simply asked if she could come and wait with me. Sometimes we sat together without saying a word. Even then, however, our hearts were focussed and attentive and beating with love. We were listening as best we could to the prayer the spirit prays within us.

We were trusting together, hoping in high shadows and the flight of wings. I

have regrets in life, but waiting with that wounded bird isn't one of them. I LEARNED her stillness and her flight. She taught me prayer, says Sue Monk Kidd

Another thing I've been doing this past week is reading a book called 'Jesus Freak — feeding, healing and raising the dead' by Sara Miles. Sara attends St Gregory's in San Francisco. Here are some quotes from her Chapter on healing (Paul is her minister). She writes:

Paul understood how to wake up people steeped in the habits of church, who found it impossible to believe they really had the power Jesus breathes on them. His practice began with asking questions: What do you want? What do you love doing? In this, Paul was following the teachings of Gregory of Nyssa, who pointed out that we are most like God in our desire. Everybody desires something: even if you're shy or cynical or convinced that nothing will ever change, there's almost always something you want more of — just as God wants more of us.

And of course God, like human beings, enjoys it when everyone sits around eating and talking.

So I followed the example of Jesus, Gregory, and Paul: we cooked for the healers' workshop. About twenty-five people — doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, activists, chaplains — came to St. Gregory's one evening, as the last of the sun was glancing off the icons' halos. I stuck three chickens in the oven, pulled out the same tables we used for family meal at the food pantry, and set them with appetizers of bread and olives and wine.

Julie had invited people with years of experience caring for suffering, marginalised, and unwell patients, to talk about what they loved doing. There was a woman who ran what she called "Hepatitis C University", teaching junkies how to research and manage sophisticated treatments; a doctor who ran the methadone clinic at the General; a nurse who said his work in a neighbourhood wracked by gang violence was making him "wonder about the existence of evil."

We got off to a shaky start. A peppy woman who billed herself as a "coach" was dispensing the kind of cheerful self-help advice that clogs the pages of magazines. If you were burning out and overwhelmed and couldn't stand your patients, "try making some *me* time," she offered brightly. "Take the evening off, get a massage."

I could see Will Hocker, over at the side of the room, rolling his eyes. "Me time," he'd say later. "Like the problem with the public health system is providers just need to treat themselves to manicures."

Julie looked mortified. She thanked the woman politely and then stood.

"So," she said, "maybe we could talk about what we really want from this work. Why do you do it? What's the best part?"

I thought about what Julie and I had groped our way toward: the idea that

healing was about creating meaning. What was our suffering, or the suffering of others, really for? Why were we going through this; what was the purpose? The search for meaning drove us all: doctors, nurses, chaplains, drug addicts, people with cancer. And we could only find it together, by telling the truth about our experiences, and listening to others.

In a way, we were hunting for the Gospel in our own stories. We were making midrash, not prettifying the narratives but exploring them for clues to our own lives...

...The process resembled the way Jesus met the woman who was healed only after she “came in fear and trembling and fell down before him, and told him the whole truth.” Sharing our real stories, unvarnished and unfinished, not only provided helpful tips or sympathetic laughs: it was the thing that allowed us to become whole...

...Will took a turn, talking about the days it felt impossible to get through the hallways of the hospital. “I mean, I’m late on my way to a meeting, and a patient’s daughter grabs me, or I get waylaid in the elevator or get paged to the emergency room,” he said. “I’ve got a grant proposal to write and email to answer and a desk full of forms to fill out. I feel as if I’m constantly behind, constantly running to catch up.”

Will gave a sweet little shrug. “So now I try to just lean *in* to the interruption,” he said. “Slow down, pay attention. *This* is my real work, not anything else.”

I listened to the methadone clinic director talk about what kept him going. “It sounds funny,” he said, “but I think what happens is I just keep falling in love; with patients, with my staff, with my wife when I get home and tell her about the day. I feel this connection, and I want it to keep happening.”

I thought about how what I wanted, and what these healers wanted, and what their sickest, most challenging patients wanted, were really not that different. In the short term, we all wanted fixes and ego gratification. We wanted to feel good about ourselves, to feel righteous or effective. We wanted the pain to stop, we wanted to get high, we wanted to correctly diagnose and cure the problem at hand.

But in the big sense, as Julie said, what we all wanted was meaning.

I sat there reflecting. I didn’t really know how to find meaning — as distinct from the right answer — but I believed it was rooted in paying attention...

...I thought about this very meeting: how I wished to be strong and powerful, and admired for my wonderful intellect, and always right. But how thin that was, finally. How much less interesting than what was here right in front of us, as we ate our roast chicken and spilled out the messy truths of our stories. What I really needed was to be going forth into the world following Jesus, with these people at my side, to see what else we could find...

...I wound up praying a lot with people who were dying themselves, or

whose beloved friend or husband or mother was ill. I got asked to pray for successful surgeries, for the safe delivery of a child, for recovery from cancer or depression or heart disease. I sat with weeping parents wondering if God would let their baby live. I took a little jar of oil to the pantry and offered healing prayer, listening to stories of lame legs, skin diseases, and blindness that could rival Scripture in their urgent physicality.

And what I learned, among other things is that prayer does not cure tuberculosis or Down Syndrome. Prayer does not cure mental illness. Prayer can't even cure a common cold.

And so, when these things happen, we all rage and weep: What good is prayer? Why did God do this to me? Why do I deserve cancer, when I'm a non smoking vegetarian and practice positive thinking? Why did my mother have a stroke, when she worked hard her whole life and never hurt anyone? Why did my baby die? Why, as the people in the Gospel ask Jesus, is this man blind? Is it his own fault, or his parent's fault? Who is being punished?

God shrugs off our desire to establish supernatural cause and effect, to scapegoat and assign blame for illness, to regulate human suffering by formulas that will explain how the good people can be protected. "Neither this man or his parents sinned." says Jesus, patiently. "He was born blind so the works of God could be revealed in him."

Jesus' answer, I fear, is the answer to all the questions of our lives. Sickness, war, falling in love, going to the grocery store: everything happens so that God's works might be revealed. But it's up to us to pray — to keep our eyes open — if we're to discover what that means.

Prayer can't cure. All prayer can do is heal, because healing comes embedded in relationship, and prayer is one of the deepest forms of relationship — with God and with other people. And through relationship, there can be healing in the absence of cure.

This is the work that Jesus gives his followers. It isn't about turning ordinary humans into miracle workers who say magic words over a sufferer and restore the sick to perfect health. The power and the responsibility Jesus gives all of us are more frightening: we are, he says, to know the truth, and from that ground enter into new relationships of healing.

The poet, Ann Lewin writes:

Prayer is like watching for the kingfisher. All you can do is be there where he is like to appear, and

wait.

Often nothing much happens;
There is space, silence and expectancy.

No visible signs, only the
knowledge that he's been there
and may come again

Seeing or not seeing ceases to matter,
you have been prepared

but when you've almost stopped
expecting it, a flash of brightness
gives encouragement.

Faith is like waiting, then watching rain fall on parched land, and waking the next day to see green shoots appearing in the mud.

Take courage all you people of the land, work, for I am with you, says the Lord of Hosts... my spirit abides among you; do not fear.

Haggai 2: 4+

Stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us... Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father who loved us, and through grace gives us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.

2 Thessalonians 2: 15–17