

THE BREAD OF ANXIOUS TOIL

November 8, 2009

Texts – Psalm 127: 1 - 2

Mark 12: 38 - 44

A man went to his doctor for a check-up. “Doc,” he said, “I look in the mirror in the morning and I look exhausted, a wreck. My jowls are sagging. My eyes are blood-shot. I feel ugly . . . awful. What do you think it is?” The doctor checked him over. “I don’t know what it is,” the doctor said finally, “but you have excellent eye-sight.”

Been there? Done that?

It’s November. The bright colors of October are behind us; the warm glow of Christmas is still afar off. Where does the energy come from to keep going?

“Unless the Lord builds the house,” the old psalmist sings, “those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest,” she continues, “eating the bread of anxious toil; for God gives sleep to the beloved.” (Psalm 127: 1-2)

Sounds like a modern lament – rise up early and go late to rest . . . eating the bread of anxious toil. It takes its toll, doesn't it?

The ancient remedy for this ailment is prayer – prayer not as it is a pious activity, but prayer as it is a way of life. Does it still work?

I love that a modern prayer which is universal in its application. “So far today, God, I’ve done all right,” it begins. “I haven't gossiped, haven’t lost my temper, haven’t been greedy, or grumpy, or nasty, or self-centered. I’m really glad about that. But in a few minutes, God, I’m going to have to get out of bed, and then I’m going to need a lot of help. Thank you.”

It's honest, at least. Prayer as a way of life is like that. It confesses "I'm going to need a lot of help." Which is to say, prayer as it is an antidote for the bread of anxious toil reminds us that we cannot go it alone.

Not exactly a welcome message in our culture, is it? We are bombarded every day by exactly the opposite. "Go for it!" the television commercials whisper to us. "Just do it!" the Nike ads advise us.

"God, grant me the courage to change the things that can be changed," a truly universal modern prayer counters, "the serenity to accept the things that cannot, and the wisdom to know the difference." Did you know it was authored by one of our United Church of Christ theologians, Reinhold Neibuhr? We've labeled Neibuhr's words "The Serenity Prayer," and clearly it speaks to this bread of anxious toil which we consume so much of in our culture. It is a beautiful prayer, but the trick to it lies in the third request – "the wisdom to know the difference," the wisdom to know what we cannot change but must accept.

What might that be for you? Shouldn't we all put at the top of our lists "the people we love"? Can we really change them? We certainly want to. We certainly try. Life together has its bumps and bruises, and the most natural instinct in the world is to set the other straight, to correct, to shape up.

I'm not talking about our relationships with children here, whether as parents or grandparents or teachers or leaders. Of course they must learn, need training, require character formation. Even here, though, I suspect we put too much emphasis upon talk. Talk alone rarely alters behavior. Model and example and the simple setting of limits are ultimately far more powerful.

But with one another as adults our efforts at reform are seldom fruitful. More often than

not they just escalate our frustrations. How many young couples go into marriage thinking that they can improve one another. “I just thought somehow he would learn,” a young woman said to me. He didn’t.

I like the wedding story about the nervous young bride who was being counseled by her minister at the rehearsal. “Now when you enter the church tomorrow,” he says to her, “you will once again walk down the aisle you’ve walked down so many times through the years.

Concentrate on that aisle. And when you get halfway down the aisle, look up and see the altar that has always been there for you and your family. Concentrate on that altar. And then, as you reach the end of the aisle, your beloved will be waiting for you. Concentrate on him.” The bride-to-be took his words to heart. The very next day, she boldly walked down the aisle to the stirring music of the processional. A few people were a bit taken aback, however, when they heard her softly chanting to herself -- “Aisle . . . altar . . . him. Aisle . . . altar . . . him.”

Life together is always “for better” and “for worse,” because it is life with imperfect human beings. “Consider how hard it is to change yourself,” Jacob Braude wisely counsels, “and you will understand what little chance you have of trying to change others.” Inevitably we run into frustrations, don’t we? Dear Abby published a letter in her column some time ago from a woman who wrote, “Dear Abby: I am forty four years old and I would like to meet a man my own age who has no bad habits.” Abby replied: “So would I!” Both women are preparing to bake an oven full of the bread of anxious toil.

We can only live peaceable lives as we accept our loves. The reality is that as adults we change and grow not so much in response to correction and criticism, and certainly not in the presence of judgment and rejection, as we do in response to affirmation and acceptance of ourselves as we are, charms and foibles, contributions and faults. If there must be admonition,

then let it be one part admonition to nine parts affirmation. “Love is not blind,” one particularly insightful preacher says; “it sees more, not less. But because it sees more, it is willing to see less.” There’s great truth in that, isn’t there?

“It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest,” the psalmist says, *“eating the bread of anxious toil . . .”* In vain . . . it means, “pointless . . . useless . . . having no value or meaningful affect.” Certainly true when we try to go it alone, setting ourselves up as judge and jury, as end all and be all of all that is. One remedy for it is the prayer, “In a few minutes, God, I’m going to have to get out of bed, and then I’m going to need a lot of help.” A deeper answer is Neibuhr’s plea for serenity. Both point us to the power of a loving God who is beyond us and yet deep within each one of us. Both counsel ultimate trust, holding back nothing.

“Beware of the ministers and theologians,” Jesus says in our gospel lesson, *“who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect on the marketplace, and to have the best seats in the sanctuary and the places of honor at the banquets!”* (This kind of hits close to home, don’t you know?) *“. . . for the sake of appearance they say long prayers.”*

Beware of them . . . don’t let them be your models. Instead, take as your example *“this poor widow who . . . out of her poverty puts in all she has.”* (Mark 12: 38-44) It is a wonderful text for a Stewardship Sunday (which by the way this is in most Protestant churches today), but it is not really about money. It is about faith. It is about trusting everything you have and are to God. Can you do that? Will you do that?

Of course it is hard. Did you think it should be easy? Whatever gave you that idea? “The road to hell is wide and easy,” someone said a long ago; “whereas the gate to heaven is narrow.” Easy is the pathway outlined and greased by ego – me, me, me. Change it to “Thy” . . . as in, *“Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”* Of course, that’s just another prayer, but

friends – prayer is the key to what we’ve been talking about all this time.

Yes, it is November. The bright colors of October are behind us; the warm glow of Christmas is still afar off. Where does the energy come from to keep going? It comes from putting your trust not in princes, in mortals in whom there is no help . . . , but in the God of Jacob, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; this One keeps faith forever . . . The Lord our God will reign forever, for all generations. Let us praise the Lord, and put all our trust in God’s hands. (Psalm 146: 3, 5-6, 10) Amen.