

Growing In Grace - Surrender

Matthew 26:20-46

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Vivian, and her husband Richard, were utterly devastated. What had begun as a routine self-examine turned into a series of trips to her doctor and specialists, and eventually the dark, heavy words - "Breast cancer."

Vivian's life had been so full of promise. Such a gifted woman. So much she wanted to do. Deeply in love with the Saviour whom she sought to serve with all her heart. All sorts of ministry opportunities were literally at her doorstep.

Now this!

And so began a long, painfully challenging road of treatment and surgery. Along the way Vivian and Richard kept a journal. After her death it was published under the title, *The School Of Dying Graces*.

They record their struggles and questions.

In the midst of one round of chemotherapy, Vivian found herself sick and tired and filled with all sorts of doubts. She asked, "God - is the deal still on? Are you still with me? Do you still have a future for me?"

She wrote -

"Today I am tired of being sick. I am tired of feeling tired. I am tired of having nothing to do, and not feeling like doing anything. I am tired of feeling pain and nausea and illness. I'm tired of the ringing in my ears. I'm tired of going to the hospital and waiting for someone to poke me or photograph me or tell me more bad news. I'm tired, Lord."(p.78)

Vivian was wrestling with God.

Though she wasn't fully aware of it at the moment, she was one in a long holy line of saints who had wrestled with Him.

Who had also asked, "God - is the deal still on?"

Looking back, Vivian and Richard reflected on Abraham - promised by God to be the forefather of a great nation of people. Well into his geriatric time, his wife's womb as dry as the desert they were wandering in, he wrestled with God and wondered if the deal of that promise was still on.

When he arrived in the promised land, only to find it inhabited by a powerful people.

When he detoured to Egypt and almost lost his wife and his life.

A family feud.

War, and the capture of his nephew.

God - is the deal still on?

God eventually responds to Abraham with a vision in Genesis 15, and again in chapter 17. He reassures and strengthens his wavering servant.

Vivian, too, wavered.

Years before contracting cancer she had prayed for God to take her to another level of devotion. She heard him say that he would. The year before the cancer struck, she asked for confirmation and heard the response, "*Trust me.*"

Then the sickness, the pain, the threat of death.

And in a dream, she found herself sitting beside a struggling, wondering Abraham under the night sky, hearing God say "*Can you count the stars? I, who made them, will provide for you, too.*"

Count the stars.

Trust me.

Vivian's struggle wasn't over. But it was a turning point. She learned to let go of her dreams, and trust God for His future.

Throughout her struggle.

And - in time - as she faced, and walked through the door of death.

A struggle.

Deep and long.

And - then - surrender.

Come with me to the garden of Gethsemane.

Witness the struggle of Jesus in prayer.

As our reading makes abundantly clear, Jesus knows full well that suffering will come. And he know that he will have to face it alone.

None of his friends will be there for him.

Totally alone.

To face awful suffering at the hands of both physical and spiritual enemies.

The hours tick by.

He shares a dinner with his friends - including the turncoat who will facilitate Jesus' arrest.

Time keeps marching.

It's almost the hour.

Before facing it, he needed "time out" - just him and his heavenly Father.
There would be some real wrestling.
Some hard back and forth.

Perhaps you've seen some of the pictures of Jesus praying in the garden.



Manicured beard.
Glowing halo.
Hands calmly folded.
Robe washed and neat.
On his knees in a careful posture.
Seen the pictures?

Erase them from your mind.

If anything, it was probably more like this:



Real struggle.
Agony.
Wavering.
Heavy.

Verse 37: ... he began to be grieved and agitated.

Verse 38: Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me."

He didn't want to be alone.

His inner being was in turmoil.

Verse 39: And going a little farther, he **threw** himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father,

if

it is possible,

let this cup

pass from me.....

yet...

...not what I want...

....but what you want."

And later -

My Father....

...IF...

this cannot pass
unless I drink it...

...your will be done.

And yet one more time -

The same words.
The same struggle.
The same deep powers wrestling back and forth.

And then,

FINALLY

after the struggle

We read the deep, deep, words of v.46, Jesus to his disciples:
"Get up, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand."

He doesn't call on them to run.
He doesn't disappear into the night.
He steps forward to face suffering and death.

Jesus surrenders his will into the hands and will of the Father in Heaven.
And having surrendered, a determination to obedience.
He has stared down the last chance to run.
He walks forward to face the future.

He had to determine to take the step,
and then actually put his foot forward.

It is the deep and hard work of surrender that we see here.
For Vivian it was surrender to the belief that even in the midst of pain and
sickness and hospitals and weakness God still had full control and a full future
for her. She wasn't spinning out of control at the whim of cruel fate.

Her future would
finally
somehow
in spite of everything she saw and sensed now

yes

it would
end up

RIGHT.

For Jesus it was surrender to the knowledge that
in the darkness of the garden
He was not alone (even though those foolish friends were snoozing!)

and the terror of having his flesh ripped open
the mocking of a nation thrown at him
demons dancing before his cross
a stone being rolled in front of the hole where his body would be dropped

none of these would be final.

He had to surrender to the will of God that there was no other way.
He had to surrender in the faith that the power of heaven was
INDEED

greater than the power of hell.

He had to surrender in the trust that His Father would not abandon him forever,
but catch his soul, and restore his body, and raise him from death.

We read the passage of Matthew 26 in mere minutes.
How long did it take?
Hours, probably.

And before that - what culminated in the garden, don't believe that this is the first time that Jesus experiences this sort of inner conflict.

He's known all along what was coming.

Read through Matthew and you see it again and again.

But here in these hours it all bursts to the surface,
boiling
frothing
struggling
a cauldron of turmoil.

It is the process of spiritual surrender that we are witnessing.

Raw.

Unedited.

Real.

Hebrews 4 tells us

We don't have a priest, [Jesus], who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all - all but the sin.

So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy. Accept the help. [The Message]

The weakness.

The testing.

Hebrews is talking about Matthew 26.

A struggle that is deep, full....

and not sinful.

It is not sinful to voice your inner conflict to God.

It is NOT sinful to express the turmoil and questions and hesitations to Him.

It is **NOT** sinful to wonder prayerfully out loud if there could be another way.

There are times when I sit with people in the middle of a huge puddle of pain.

Through the tears, in the middle of kicking walls and stomping the ground and screaming "**WHY?**" in sometimes colourful ways, with less than Rideau Hall decorum, they stop -

- and with sagging shoulders, red eyes, and barely a whisper. they say,
"I really shouldn't say things like this..."

Matthew 26 and Hebrews 4 gently challenge that and say, "Why not?"
It's not sin to struggle.

In fact, when you do, you're right with Vivian in that long holy line of saints who have struggled.

You can find vocabulary for that struggle laced all through the bible book of Psalms.

When I coach people on pastoral visiting, they often ask for hints on bible passages to have ready to read. Often I'll tell them to keep their finger very near the book of Psalms.

For it is the song book of the human soul.

Including the struggling, suffering soul.

God, don't refuse to hear me!

God, don't be silent.

How long, O Lord, how long?

Wake up, God!

Why do you hide from me, O Lord?

- lyrics from the Psalms.

Probably the worst thing we can do is swallow hard, suck it back, and go out with a smile, pretending that everything is just wonderful.

That we're fully in control.

And it's going just fine, thank you.

Far better to admit we need help.

That we've lost it.

That we have no idea.

And that it stinks!

Surrender those feelings, and the present mess, and all our questions, into the hand of God who is out there somewhere -

- like the sun or moon hidden behind huge storm clouds and raging winds.

- out there and working, even if we can't see Him right now.

Surrender it to God.

Talk it out.

Fight it out if you have to.

Even if it doesn't fit the model of pious look, bended knee, and folded hand that we like to picture as prayerful.

Journal, if that helps, like it did Vivian.

Share it with a friend - preferably one who will stay awake with you!

Just

DON'T

bottle it up.

I get far more worried about the ones who smile all the time or seem stoic and in full control than I do about those who express their doubts and anger and questions.

And funny, you know, it seems to be a real guy thing.

Not sure why.

But the women have much to teach the other half of us about admitting powerlessness and lack of control and the need to receive assistance.

Guys have a hard time surrendering.

So gents - this passage is for you.

I challenge you to surrender -

- the memories of past activities that haunt you
- the worries about providing for tomorrow that burden you
- the temptations of today that hound you

I want to invite you to join Mary, the mother of Jesus as she prayed,

"I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your Word."

And I want to encourage you with these words from Psalm 34:5 -

Those who look to the Lord are radiant; they will never be put to shame

Meaning - God **WON'T** let you down when you put all your marbles in his corner. However long the darkness or storms or pain lasts, he won't walk away. He won't fall asleep on you. He won't forget.

And when, like Jesus, you move out in faith - dare to take a step, whatever that next step may need to be -

- even one towards suffering, rather than running from it
know that Heaven will honour that step.

And you will experience the miracle of inner strength from a source you maybe never knew existed.

The source of the Spirit of the Saviour Jesus.

The One the Bible calls the Comforter.

Alive.

With you.

In you.

Dallas Willard, "*The strongest human will is always the one that has surrendered to the will of God and is willing to act with it.*"

[Renovation Of The Heart]

There is a sequence here in Matthew 26.

Anxiety.

Acquiescence.

Acceptance.

Action.

Call it stages of surrender, if you want.

Sort of like the stages of grief.

I've seen it happen in the life of believer after believer.

Here in this congregation and elsewhere.

Stages that God guides us through.

Stages that Jesus experienced.

Anxiety -

what's happening?

It can't be real!

It hurts so bad!

I can't take it!

Acquiescence -

O God, can't there be another way?

Please God, I know you're there.

Lord, grab hold... of me, of this.

Acceptance -

I don't understand, but Lord, take over.
Lord, you do what you need to do.

Action -

Lord, in this, through this,
(and often) looking back at this -
What do you want me to do now?
How can I serve you, anyway?

Friends - the reality is that we live very imperfect lives in a very broken world. But God's Son has entered our reality with His even greater heavenly reality. And into the midst of our aches, and broken moments, and painful seasons He remains. And works.

And moves history towards the day when Heaven will open, God will descend, and earth will be re-Created.

The new age of Paradise.

Until then, a key word will be surrender.

Of the unanswered questions. And the pain. And the broken dreams. Knowing that the One who brought Jesus out of the tomb on that bright Easter morning, overwhelming the guards and changing history, will work that same power in our lives.

He will.

Some where.

Some how.

He will.

Please pray with me:

God, grant me serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can
and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time,
accepting hardships as a pathway to peace

taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it,
trusting that You will make all things right

if I surrender to Your will.

So that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with You forever
in the next.

Amen