

*Trees, Teresa, and You and Me – based on Luke 18:1-8*  
*Aspen Community UMC*  
*October 21, 2007*

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He said that they should always pray – and not give up.  
Does that mean that we are to be in prayer in everything we do?

Are we being asked to walk through our days  
focused and available in the here and now – all the time?

Is that what it would be like to always be praying?  
In those prayers, would we be asking for something?

“Oh God, just do this or that.”

Or, would they be prayers of thanks – of appreciation?

Or prayers of meditation?

What would be the reason for continuous prayer?

Would it make our lives easier?

Would we avoid some of the pitfalls of life?

Or would we meet the challenges easier?

There was a great experiment done in the early 1980's in the desert.

Anyone remember it? It was called the biodome.

The biodome was to be the perfect living environment for  
human beings, plants, and animals.

A huge glass dome was constructed, and an artificial,  
controlled environment was created

with purified air and water, filtered light, and so on.

It was supposed to have the perfect growing conditions  
for trees, fruits, vegetables – and people.

People lived in the biodome for months at a time.

It was wonderful because everything seemed to do well, with some exceptions.

One of those exceptions was that when the trees that were planted  
grew to be a certain height – they just toppled over.

This baffled the scientists until they finally realized  
the one natural element they forgot to recreate in the biodome was – wind.

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A tree needs wind to blow against it.  
A tree needs wind to blow against it,  
so that its root system will grow deeper into the soil.  
The deeper roots in turn support the tree as it grows taller.

What a great lesson we can take from this experience of a contrived environment.

Who among us does not long for a perfect growing environment  
with no disruptions, no childhood traumas, or events that cause harm?

Yet, we learn from the biodome that a wholly artificial environment  
is out of touch with reality.

It does not work nearly like we might have imagined.

Still, we strive to avoid excessive challenge  
those times when life seems to be pushing from every side.  
And, when those challenges come, we tend to curse them.  
If the trees could talk, I wonder if they would curse the wind  
each time they encountered a storm.

Most trees do not stand rigid, resisting the flow of energy.  
Perhaps they know they are deepening their root system.  
And, they are growing stronger and taller – nature's wisdom at work.

It follows for me that if we are flowing with nature, with God,  
we are in touch with the wind and the weathering of things.

And, of course, like a tree, we too need the winds of life pushing against us.  
Perhaps God is like the soil, the essential milieu into which we grow our lives -  
holding us as the soil holds the roots of the tree.

When we think of it like this we can accept the challenges in our lives  
as growing those spiritual roots  
in the soil of a divine presence and power.<sup>1</sup>

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Then, like the widow in front of the judge  
we are able to stand firm in our needs – and for the needs of others  
despite the blowing winds of culture and society and politics.

There is a theme in our reading today about struggle,  
not a struggle with G-d, but a struggle with life.  
Jesus tells the story as a way to help his listeners – the disciples – you and me  
understand more about prayer  
or perhaps to teach us that life itself is a prayer.  
He contrasts the judge who simply does not care  
with G-d who cares beyond all humans even know how  
something like the comparison of G-d adorning the lilies of the fields,  
how much more we are cared for than even the lilies of the fields.

What I am learning from this is that when I contend with  
the challenges of my life,  
when I do that in a prayerful way – I am growing  
those roots that give me the depth I need.  
For, G-d is the soil in which my deep roots grow.  
And, I am more and more convinced that we live more fully,  
and thrive more abundantly when we, and those around us,  
cultivate the divine depth within us  
and live confidently that what happens next will be in our best interest.

There is an old story about a tailor who visits his rabbi and says,  
“I have a problem with my prayers. If someone comes to me and says,  
‘Mendel, you’re a wonderful tailor,’ that makes me feel good.  
I feel appreciated. I can go on feeling good for a whole week,  
even longer on the strength of one compliment like that.

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But if people came to me every day, one after another, hour after hour,  
and kept saying to me 'Mendel, you're a wonderful tailor,'  
over and over again it would drive me crazy.

It would soon get to the point where I wouldn't want to listen to them anymore.

I would tell them to go away and let me do my work in peace.

This is what bothers me about prayer.

It seems to me that if we told God how wonderful he is once a week,  
even once every few weeks,  
and just one or two of us at a time, that's all he would need.

Is G-d so insecure that he needs us praising him every day?  
three times a day, morning, noon, and night?

It seems to me it would drive him crazy."

The rabbi smiled and said, "Mendel, you're absolutely right.  
You have no idea how hard it is for God to listen to all our praises,  
hour after hour, day after day.

But G-d knows how important it is for us – to utter that praise,  
so in God's great love for us, God tolerates all of our prayers."<sup>2</sup>

We are told to pray often, and we learn from so many who have gone before us  
that the prayer of gratitude draws us closer to the divine.

It becomes a sweet space from which we can contend with life.

Meaningful prayer becomes the soil in which we are rooted.

(How to pray a good prayer is for another day...)

And then there is Teresa – who teaches us so much about  
contending with life – and rejoicing with G-d.

Teresa was a 16<sup>th</sup> century mystic, so to speak, and master of the one-liner.

She was born to middle class parents in the city of Avila, Spain.

She came into the world about the time Martin Luther was at odds with the Pope.

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She entered a Carmelite convent in her hometown when she was 20.

Her parents were not at all pleased.

Yet, in those days we are told that entering a convent  
was not much of a retreat from the outside world.

Convent life reflected the attitudes in the rest of society.

Prayer was largely ignored and worship didn't seem to matter much.

Teresa was sick a lot during her first years in the convent.

She had none of the zeal she was later known for.

She is said to have suffered from fits, tumors, and broken bones.

And then at some point when she was about 45 she underwent a transformation.

Her physical ailments disappeared.

She started dreaming about a new way of doing things  
based on a life of work and prayer.

Almost everyone was opposed to her ideas about reforming the convent -  
clergy, nuns, the nobility and the townspeople.

But, Teresa was not easily discouraged  
and finally got permission to begin her own convent.

Beginning with three nuns, the small group lived in almost perpetual silence and simplicity.

Her life was rigorous, as was her order, but it was not dull or without joy.

Music and dancing were a regular part of life there.

Because Teresa believed that, "Virtue and merriment go hand in hand."

"Just because the order is austere, there is no need for austere people," she said.

Her order was flourishing and she was asked to begin another.

She ended up founding 32 convents.

Teresa spent long hours in prayer.

She became a teacher and tutor of contemplative practice.

What is so important about Teresa is this:

She taught us that contemplation and action are not to be separated.

That an active life is barren without contemplation,  
and the contemplative life is empty without action.

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And she had a great sense of humor.

People that knew her talked about her “reported” conversations with God.

People asked, “Was God beginning to sound a little bit like Teresa?”

One time when Teresa was attempting to cross a stream,  
she slipped off her donkey and fell headlong into the water, nearly drowning.

It was report that God reminded Teresa that he chastises those he loves.

“I treat all my friends this way.”

To which Teresa turned her eyes heavenward and sputtered,  
“No wonder you have so few friends, when you treat the ones you have so badly.”

“Lord, save us from sullen saints,” this grand woman once observed.<sup>3</sup>

What great perspective on prayer and the active life she gives us.

She helps me understand our reading today.

So very human – and her church now calls her a saint.

Like the trees swaying in the wind, deepening their roots,  
we do deepen ours as we live fully and pray the same way.

The mystical Christian, the contemplative nun who loved  
discipline and celebration, prayer and dancing  
grew very deep roots in this world and in G-d.

What might she suggest for our lives, our church?

It would come with a sense of humor – probably a good one-liner.

For trees, Teresa, you and me,  
there is no perfect environment without adversity, for we thrive on some adversity.

We also seem wired for that relationship with the divine,

and as the rabbi advised Mendel, the tailor,

it was not G-d who needed the praise.

It was Mendel who needed to give it.

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Like the widow in the scripture, there are times we have to fight for justice  
with others and for others,

and there are times when things go our way.

What makes it easier is the depth of divine love  
and having grown those deep roots that give us stability when we need it.

I invite you to let the widow and the judge be your teacher,  
and the biodome with its toppled-over trees,  
and Mendel the tailor and his rabbi,  
and Teresa

who joined prayer, work, and play into a very full life.

Let them all be our teachers.

that we may pray more deeply and live more fully.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Merritt Jones. *The Art of Being: 101 Ways to Practice Purpose in Your Life*.p. 141

<sup>2</sup> King Duncan, *Collected Sermons*

<sup>3</sup> William R.White. *Speaking in Stories*. P. 89