

Reflection and Prayer time – Spiritual WD-40 - A Balm for Our Times - May 11, 2020

Scripture Reading: Jeremiah 8:22 – Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?

It seems like both yesterday and a year ago that it was March 11. That was for me the day of utmost awareness of how this pandemic was becoming widespread and that it might create major change in life. That day, policies and procedures came out about social distancing protocols, canceling significant events and notifying volunteers of cancellations here at VOA Mid-States and my church council met that night to discuss how we would be protecting people by canceling services at some point in the near future or switching to some type of virtual services. I remember our nervous laughter at the church council about starting a virtual service routine and I felt very anxious when we voted to continue with an in person church service the next Sunday, only to regroup and cancel in person services 2 days later. The next day on the 12th I high-tailed it to New York City to pick up my daughter who'd canceled her spring break trip with friends to Montreal and by that evening she'd been furloughed from work. I remember saying to her that she might be with us a while and she said, "oh no, I'll be coming back next weekend." I was so conscious as never before of everything I was touching, of her strangely riding in the passenger side back seat with no hugs from me until 14 days later, but still feel like it was our lucky Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> that she got out of New York City that day. She is still in Louisville today. Some memory of time in the past two months is super blurry but that week of mid-March is sharp and vivid in my recollection. It's been a truly terrifying patch of time. I can imagine that there vivid memories for you also of specific conversations in your growing awareness of what might be coming.

I remember also that on March 11 I read the following from one of my favorite writers, Anne Lamott:

I am on a deadline. I wish I could write something new about how we might best come through this terrifying patch of time. But I decided to re-post a slightly rewritten piece from a few years ago. Maybe there is something in it that will help break the trance of fear a lot of us are feeling.

Where do we start?

We breathe, confused and stunned, pray, stick together.

Right foot, left foot, right foot, breathe.

I wish there was a website we could turn to called, "What it means, What is True, and What to do." Lots of very tense religious people are going to insist that their Scripture answers all these questions. That's nice. Lots of them will try to hustle us into joining them in Vengeance World. As that had just been so helpful before, right?

So where do we even begin today? What do we do when it feels like we are all doomed, and the future will only be worse, and we can't remember anything that ever helped us

come through? Well, we have shards of truth, and we can gather them up, bits of broken mosaic tile that shine.

We know that this is a dangerous place, that we are a vulnerable species, that Cain is still killing Abel, that the world is hotter. And yet also, that Love is sovereign here.

We know that "Why" is not a useful question; and "Figure it out" is not a good slogan. We know that the poor, the innocent, babies, the very old, and the LGBTQ community always bear the brunt of hardship and disaster.

So where do we find grace and light? If you mean right now, try some radical self-care: friendly self-talk, a cup of tea.

Grace always does bat last, and the light always overcomes the darkness--always, historically. But not necessarily later the same day, or tomorrow, after lunch. So kindness and encouragement to everyone, even to our very disappointing selves. This pandemic will be hard, but we're good at hard. Wendell Berry told me 25 years ago, in Advent, the darkest days of winter, "It gets darker and darker and darker, and then Jesus is born." But you don't have to believe in a God with socks and shoes on: maybe just Goodness? Love?

What is the answer? Gandhi is almost always the answer.

Jesus's love for the poor and refugees is the answer.

Adding a bit of light and warmth to these cold dark days doesn't hurt. Candles are beautiful and bring a soupçon of solace to our souls.

People living on the streets could really use a Hello, and a buck, and bottles of water.

Grace will always show up in the helpers, as Mr. Rogers' mother used to tell him in times of tragedy. But today, right now, if you have a nice bumper sticker that explains or makes sense of it all, it's probably best if you keep that to yourself. It is definitely best that you not share it with us. It will cause me to get a tic in my eye and will guarantee that the next time I see you, I will run for my cute little life. Everyone in his or her right mind will.

So how do we shelter in place in the midst of fear and fear?

We stick together in our anxiety and cluelessness. We reach out for any help at all; we share any truth and encouragement and humor we come upon. We feed the poor and send money to people who are helping save children around the world. These are good responses. I am going to recommend that we do that today, and tomorrow.

I notice we are being gentler, more patient and kind with each other. If people are patient and kind, that's a lot. It means something of the spirit is at work.

We will come through this pandemic, but it will take time. I so hate this! Hate this, hate this, hate this, and do not agree to this, but have no alternative, because it is Truth: it will take time.

We're at the beginning of human and personal evolution. Whole parts of the world don't even think women are people. But we show up. Maybe we ask God for help. We do the next right thing. We buy or cook a bunch of food for the local homeless. We return phone calls, library books, smiles. We make eye contact with others, and we go to the market and flirt with people who seem lonely. This is a blessed sacrament. Tom Weston

taught me decades ago that in the face of human tragedy, we go around the neighborhood and pick up litter, even though there will be more tomorrow. It is another blessed sacrament.

We take the action and the insight will follow: that we are basically powerless, but we are not helpless. We wash our hands, etc. We pray and/or hope for Grace, which is spiritual WD-40. I have no answers but know one last thing that is true: More will be revealed. Things are much wilder, weirder, richer, more insane, beautiful, and more profound than I am comfortable with. The paradox is that in the reality of this, we discover that in the smallest moments of amazement, at our own crabby stamina, at kindness, even to strange lonely people who worry us, and gentle attention, to breath and all the new blossoms, we will be saved.

Looking back to the scripture, we are decrying the lack of and anticipating the arrival of a balm, a miracle cure, a vaccine, an answer. Week before last, my husband and daughter and I went to a couple of senior housing properties here, South Oaks and Spanish Cove, and we played music and sang outside the buildings to the seniors who can't get out much and can't have visitors right now. If you want a captive audience, there is no better method than to go to a senior housing community during a pandemic. There is little else to compete with you for their attention. We sang "All I Have to Do is Dream" by the Everly Brothers and "Let it Be" by the Beatles among other songs. "When I find myself in times of trouble, mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom, let it be. And in my hour of darkness she is standing right in front of me, speaking words of wisdom, let it be. And when the broken hearted people living in the world agree, there will be an answer, let it be. For though they may be parted there is still a chance that they will see, there will be an answer, let it be. And when the night is cloudy, there is still a light that shines on me, shine on until tomorrow, let it be. Whisper words of wisdom, let it be."

There will be an answer, there will be a balm. In the meantime, what do we do while we await the balm?

I say the foreshadowing of the balm has already arrived and it's the Spiritual WD-40 that Anne Lamott referenced. If I were to take a poll of you all right now, I would guess that the vast majority of you have two things in your house right now – duct tape and WD-40. And you have those things because they are universal remedies, even if just temporarily, for a lot of problems or things needing fixing.

In his essay "The Spiritual Lessons I Learned from WD-40, Devin Miller writes:

"From loosening a rusted bolt to cleaning toilet bowls, almost everyone has used WD-40 at one point or another in their life. However, how many of us know the actual story of where WD-40 came from?"

We learn from the lab book used by the chemist who developed WD-40 back in 1953 that WD-40 stands for Water Displacement, 40th attempt. The chemist at the fledgling Rocket Chemical Company, Norm Larsen, was attempting to invent a formula that would prevent corrosion by displacing water. Norm failed 39 times to invent his formula before his persistence paid off as he perfected the formula on his 40th try. WD-40 actually worked so well that employees snuck cans WD-40 out of the plant to use at home. Now, almost every home has a can of WD-40 somewhere in the house or garage.”

Miller wrote, “As a car guy, I love WD-40 and I have learned a valuable spiritual lesson from the story about WD-40. Never give up. In life and in the gospel, there are times that we get knocked down and as we are trying to get up, we get knocked down again and again. It is easy at those times to want to just stay down, to give up, and to stop trying. Why keep trying if we are just going to get knocked down again? Why keep striving towards perfection when we will keep failing? Giving up is easier than continuing to try. Giving up is the easier path that seems more inviting. When you have these feelings of wanting to give up and turn way from the gospel path and the path of life, reflect on the words spoken by Mary Cook, first counselor in the young women’s general presidency:

As you are growing older, young women, the path is becoming steeper, and you may want to give up. Life is more challenging, filled with decisions and temptations at every turn. You may be tempted to try another route, even when signs of danger are posted. You may doubt your abilities, and you may wonder as one young woman did, “Is it really possible to remain virtuous in today’s world?” The answer, my young friends, is “Yes!” And my counsel to you is similar to that given by Winston Churchill during World War II: never, never, never give up! (see “Never Give In” [speech, Harrow School, London, England, Oct. 29, 1941]).”

So it seems, balm is already arriving as the Spiritual WD-40 teaser, even as we wait for THE balm, the solution. I saw it in the windows of a senior citizen at Spanish Cove who stuck construction paper signs in the windows that said “Thank you, sweet and kind” and “May God continue to Bless you All.” It arrived in uproarious laughter in a zoom staff meeting last week when Gema Moreno’s dog Leila completely lost her mind, snarling at all the strange people in zoom boxes on the computer screen. One of my favorite quotes of Anne Lamott’s is that “laughter is carbonated holiness” and I believe it’s one of God’s greatest gifts, along with tears.

I say Spiritual W-D 40, a precursor of permanent balm, has shown up in so many different ways: employees pitching in for funeral expenses for their colleague’s grandson, in staff being so treasured that they were included in the few people allowed at a funeral of a teenager at Unity House, in a drive thru baby shower for a beloved employee probably very nervous about giving birth in this strange time, in people scrambling to find masks and make homemade sanitizer and time for one another, in the faithfulness of staff who persevere and perhaps answer for the 50<sup>th</sup> times why things are different than before... left foot, right foot, left foot, keep moving forward one day at a time, bringing steadiness and constant care and continuing to recognize the high value on the lives and well-being of people that the world doesn’t always seem to value

or care about. And in numerous other ways I have seen the Spiritual WD – 40 show up and linger and smooth out, in measures large and small, the rough edges of this pandemic.

So we continue to wade and slog through this perplexing and very draining time, some of us with tears and deep, penetrating sorrow and we never make light of or fail to acknowledge that deep grief abides in our community and world. As we slog through and await with great longing the final balm that will eradicate this disease, we apply the Spiritual W-D 40 to ourselves and each other, day in and day out. So yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus and there is a balm in Gilead and I think it smells like the Spiritual WD-40 we are anointed in for this work of positive change, in the care of one another and our community. Apply, soak it in, repeat. Thanks be to God.