

The Will to Struggle, and the Right Struggle
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
August 22, 2021 Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Psalms 121; Genesis 32:22-31; Luke 18:1-8

Call to Worship: Last week many of us offered wisdom about wisdom, and one of the wisest insights came from Martha Manheim who saw the service on our website on her 97th birthday, I think. She wrote, “The hard part is that wisdom comes mostly through difficulty in living. If it weren’t painful we would not learn.”

Sometimes we need to hit rock bottom. Jacob tricked his brother, Esau, into trading his entire inheritance for a bowl of stew, and then Jacob tricked his father, Isaac, into giving him the blessing that should have gone to Esau. Esau vowed to kill Jacob, so Jacob ran away and grew rich by tricking his father-in-law after his father-in-law tricked him.

This is the holiest family in the Bible, mind you, the descendants of Abraham and forebears of Moses and Jesus. If you were God, what would you do with these lying, cheating tricksters? Well, what God did was throw Jacob to rock bottom so he would grow up. God sent Jacob back to Esau who came to meet him with an army of 400 men. On the eve of what looked like certain death a man came and wrestled with Jacob. It was the same presence of God that comes to us when we wrestle with our troubles all night. The man wounded him in the hip, yet still Jacob held on, so the man blessed Jacob and gave him the new name, Israel, which combines the Hebrew words God and struggle. Jacob rose from the dust, limping from his wound, exhausted and empty, and blessed with the power to make peace with Esau.

“God and struggle” is the formula for wisdom, for transformation, for maturing and evolving.

I suspect that you have had times of struggle when you wrestled with God, when you held on and emerged wounded but blessed. I know I have.

Right now all humanity, all God’s earth is caught up in a struggle. By entering into it with faith, we will receive both the wound of grief and the blessing of wisdom and power that God knows we need.

Let us worship together...

Time with the Children: Good morning! Stories we have heard before take on new meaning as we grow and change and the world changes around us, so I am going to tell you a story you may have heard before, and I invite you to listen carefully to see what it says to you now. Here it is. Once upon a time a school science class was watching a butterfly hatch from its cocoon. The butterfly was struggling—it couldn't get its big wings free—it kept struggling and collapsing and struggling more. Finally, a girl felt so sorry for the beautiful thing that she reached out to help. The teacher told her no, you can't do that! Butterflies need the struggle against the cocoon in order to strengthen their wings—they can't fly unless they struggle first. There are things we want in life, but we have to go through struggles to get them, and those struggles are important parts of the journey, we actually need them. But here is an interesting thing—all the spiritual traditions exist to help us when we are struggling, and they teach that we should help others when they are struggling—that's part of the Golden Rule and loving our neighbor as our self. We need both challenges that force us to strengthen our wings, and also loving support—like the science teacher who protected the butterfly and helped the girl learn. I remember when I learned to ride a bike. My mother had to let me wobble and fall and skin my legs and get back up and try again, but she also stood near enough to keep me from careening into the road and getting run over.

It never ends, ideally—growing up and learning to do new things—and right now the whole world is growing up, we are learning that we have to treat the earth and one another better. Humanity has to break out of its old cocoon. We need to keep struggling to do it, and at the same time we need love and compassion because it is so hard to make such a big change. There is something we can do that helps us find the inspiration, courage and strength we need in order to struggle, and there is something we can do that helps us feel held, loved and comforted as we struggle, and the same something does both ...Can you guess? Jesus put it this way: Pray always and do not lose heart, do not give up....

Sermon: The Will to Struggle, and the Right Struggle

Last week we read from the book of Proverbs where Wisdom calls out, “Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.”

Human history is full of people laying aside their immaturity and living and walking in a whole new way based on insight and wisdom. Think of the young Buddha seeing suffering and

death and struggling with it until he became still and blossomed into enlightenment. Think of thirty-year-old Jesus struggling in the wilderness with the temptations of his ego and overcoming them to emerge full of the Holy Spirit's wisdom and power. Think of decadent Francis immersed in the materialism and violence of a society that promised to make him rich, when he gave up everything and walked naked and penniless out of Assisi. Think of timid Gandhi rising against racist oppression and fulfilling the Sermon on the Mount like no one since Jesus. Think of Nelson Mandela struggling for 27 years in apartheid prison and emerging with so much wisdom and spiritual power that he could transform his nation. Think of Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai and so many other amazing young women today whose will to struggle has made them wise beyond their years to help humanity mature.

The will to struggle is a gift from the Spirit of life, like the will of the butterfly to break free of the cocoon, but there are different ways that humans can struggle, and it makes a huge difference which way we choose.

One of the greatest tragedies of our time was that we did not follow spiritual wisdom in 2001 after the terrorist attacks on the United States. We had a moment when our suffering and grief could have led us to greater compassion for other wounded countries, when we could have seen how our materialism and violence led to the resentment and desperation that motivated the terrorists. As Bill Coffin pointed out, we had the good will of the world and we squandered it. We could have brought humanity together as one to create a global society of such justice and love of neighbor that we disarmed the terrorists without revenge.

But instead we invaded Afghanistan, and twenty years later we can see the disastrous results for our nation and for the world.

We had the will to struggle, but not the right struggle. Our national ego, our smallest, meanest collective selfish self, chose the way we would struggle, the easy way that avoided facing our immaturity, that required no inner growth and condemned us to repeat the suffering of the ages.

We see examples of right struggle in today's scriptures. Pilgrims on a hard journey lift up their eyes to the hills when their instinct would be to look down at their feet. Right struggle is to place our trust in the guidance of a higher power rather than in our basest self-interest. Right struggle is to keep striving for God's realm, following the paths of righteousness in the faith that

everything else will work out for the good, even when the sun smites us by day and there is no shade in sight.

Right struggle is to knock at God's door like the widow and keep knocking even when we get no answer, even when it seems God does not hear or care, when we doubt that there is a moral arc in the universe that bends toward justice.

Right struggle is to wrestle with God all night and not give up, to believe that the Spirit of this world that breaks our heart or puts our hip out of joint will also bless us, and that both the pain and the blessing will help us grow and fulfill our calling to establish the beloved community of God's realm on earth—making peace even with the Esau who wants to kill us, making peace even with our past wrongs.

The scriptures and the Christian contemplative or mystical tradition lay out a path of wisdom through struggle. The path is described in the ancient Greek terms as leading from kenosis to metanoia to agape to koinonia, meaning from self-emptying to spiritual transformation to unconditional love to the realm of God on earth.

Today we see many forms of struggle in response to a world in upheaval. Some are self-serving, like amassing wealth or grabbing power or building walls. Survivalists are prepping and proud boys are taking target practice.

Many around us are living in denial or despair as the news gets worse. Many are paralyzed by fear.

But in our church family we have people who are like the pilgrim in the Psalm and the widow at the door and Jacob wrestling with God. They have the will to struggle, and they are choosing the right struggle to turn to the Spirit, to trust in God's higher power, to follow the way of Christ even when it seems it could not possibly help.

It is easy to look back at the Buddha, Jesus, Francis, Gandhi, Mandela, Thunberg or Malala and imagine that they knew the difference they could make if they undertook the right struggle, but that is not the case.

The Buddha was determined not to get up from under the Bodhi tree until he had found a new way forward, but he had no way of knowing that he would, and he had to struggle a long time to get there. Jesus sweated blood in the Garden of Gethsemane and felt forsaken on the

cross. Francis was literally naked, laughed at and as weak, vulnerable and helpless as he could be when he placed his trust entirely in God.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta struggled terribly with a spiritual crisis in which she rarely felt any hint of God's existence. It lasted over forty-five years, and yet she had the faith to endure. She recited the prayer of St. Francis every day, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace." The dark night of soul did not stop, but she won the Nobel Peace Prize and was eventually canonized for the order that she founded that vows to give "wholehearted free service to the poorest of the poor."

We have no way of knowing that our struggle will make a difference, that we will be able to change human civilization enough and fast enough to save life on earth, but the wisdom born of past struggles tells us that anxiety about success leads us down the wrong path. We need to keep wrestling, knocking and walking on in faith, trusting that this inner process will allow God's higher power to flow through us as we go.

Let us pray in silence, consenting to God's loving presence and transforming action within us, asking the Holy Spirit to give us the will and the wisdom we need...

Poem by Herbert Goertz:

If you know the magic word
all of nature starts to sing:
there is a song in everything.