

Reflection and Prayertime – We do not Labor in Vain  
June 29, 2021

Yesterday the sermon at my church was preached by a chaplain named David who works at the Kentucky State Reformatory where he's been for about 5 years I believe. Prior to that he was the chaplain at Central State Hospital for psychiatric patients where he'd been serving for close to 20 years. He commented that he used to think it was truly hard to be a chaplain at a psychiatric hospital; that was before he served inmates including persons with mental illness who were also incarcerated in the prison system. He was authentic enough so share that he gets very weary at times and when someone asked him recently how it was going, he commented that it was just 3 years until eligible for retirement and he hoped he was going to make it 'til then. He read the Scripture from Isaiah 49:4 that reads: But I said 'I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing at all. Yet what is due me is in the Lord's hand, and my reward is with my God.'

David shared how when he left seminary years ago he thought he would be sharing the gospel, the "good news" and yet a major part of his role at the prison is to deliver the bad news. He spoke of receiving word that the mother of an inmate with severe mental illness had passed away and he had to go to the unit where the man is basically in a room with nothing in it because he has to be protected from self-injury and he spoke with him through a crack in the door to tell him of her passing and then monitor him for stress and attempts at self-harm. He said all the inmates knew that when he was looking for them that it was likely someone in their family had died and this man reacted with dread when he saw him.

He talked about the difficulty of being called to challenging ministry and that we are all called in some form or fashion to be about the work of love, of kindness, of justice-seeking. He said a colleague of his said that if God calls you, God has factored in your frailty, your stupidity, your weaknesses, and has called you anyway. This is freeing to know that we can be authentically and imperfectly human and still meet the needs of others.

Michael Yaconelli says in his book "Messy Spirituality" that "Spirituality is not a formula. It is not a test of competency; it is about intimacy. Spirituality is not about perfection; it is about connection. The way of the spiritual life begins where we are in the mess of our lives. Accepting the reality of our broken, flawed lives is the beginning of spirituality not because the spiritual life will remove our flaws but because we let go of seeking perfection and instead, seek God, the one who is present in the tangledness of our lives. Spirituality is not about being fixed; it is about God's being present in the mess of our unfixedness.

So we accept our limitations, move forward with faithfulness, serve the needs of others (meeting them where they are) and remember the outcome/reward is God's. Our fidelity matters and our labor is not in vain in the long game. Thanks be to God.