

My sermon title requires a little explanation this morning: “Spirituality Is Not for Wimps.” I don’t mean that literally. We are all spiritual beings. Therefore, spirituality is for everybody. What I was getting at, with that title, is that spiritual growth tends to require discomfort. It tends to involve either suffering, or crisis, or overcoming some kind of obstacle.

Author Richard Rohr calls it “the pattern of spirituality.” He claims spiritual growth occurs when our well-ordered lives suddenly become disordered. Many of us have experienced this. Life seems to be going along just fine. Suddenly, there is a layoff, or a divorce, or a debilitating injury, or a midlife crisis.

We don’t choose to go through these kinds of experiences, but in them lies an opportunity. If we’re open to it, those experiences can lead to spiritual growth: deeper wisdom, a new direction, or a greater sense of purpose.

Rohr describes the “pattern of spirituality” with just three words. It’s a movement from order, to disorder and finally to a reordering. He says there is no nonstop flight from order to reorder. We have to go through some discomfort. We don’t grow spiritually until our neatly-ordered lives fall into disorder.

This is exactly what Saul experienced. I think it’s safe to say, Saul had a pretty clear direction for his life. He was a Pharisee. That doesn’t happen by accident. He was highly educated. He was an expert in the Law of Moses, the most important element of the Hebrew tradition. That means he was a highly successful person, a foremost defender of the Law.

On his way to Damascus in order to round up disciples of Jesus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and he heard the voice of Jesus ask, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul got up from the ground, but he couldn’t see. That fierce, independent, driven, and successful man became helpless. He was entirely dependent on the kindness of others. The text even indicates his traveling companions led him by the hand.

It's a long story that we didn't read today, but Saul, whom we know by his Greek name, Paul, eventually committed himself to the ministry of Jesus Christ and became Christ's apostle to the Gentiles. His life was turned around 180°. The foremost persecutor of the church became its greatest evangelist.

I imagined traveling back in time and trying to convince Saul to stop persecuting Christians. I'm guessing I would have about as much luck changing Saul as a Republican today has of changing a Democrat or a Democrat has of changing a Republican. Real change and spiritual growth are not simply intellectual exercises.

Saul's change came about because his own plans were brought to an abrupt halt. He was literally brought to his knees. It was the disruption of Saul's well-ordered life that redirected him and led to a reordered life.

Saul found his real purpose. Being blinded was the best thing that ever happened to him. He would write, "I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him." That's the pattern of spirituality, and once you recognize it, you begin to see it everywhere.

Think of the birth of a child. While in the womb, the baby is hopefully safe, and warm, and well-fed. But that child can't experience fullness of life by staying in the womb. It goes through the trauma of birth. There's a slap on the rear-end. The child takes its first breath. It never could have imagined the beauty of the world outside, the laughter and delight it would experience beyond the crimped confines of the womb, as well as the joy he or she would bring to parents and grandparents.

Easter was two weeks ago. Holy Week fits the pattern of spirituality. There was the earthly ministry of Jesus. Disorder took the form of suffering and death. You can't get to resurrection without crucifixion.

With resurrection, the ministry and presence of Jesus Christ took on a whole new form. He transcended human limitations. In the words of Paul, God has put all things under Christ's feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

Think about every dramatic movie you've watched, or every novel you've read. The main character never grows or learns or experiences transformation without some kind of

crisis or obstacle to overcome. Growth tends to require discomfort. In a real sense, spirituality is not for wimps.

All I want to say about this is that I think this has implications for how we react to the crises, the challenges, and the traumatic experiences of our lives. I want to be clear, I'm not a believer that all things happen for a reason. I don't believe God causes pain and suffering in order to teach us a lesson. I think a lot of bad things happen in this world simply because people can be vicious, and greedy, and hateful.

But I do believe everything that happens to us can be an opportunity for growth and transformation. Have you ever had a traumatic experience that changed you? Did something happen to alter the course of your life? For me, it was my call to ministry. I know I've talked about my mom in the past. Today is my mom's birthday. That's probably why she was on my mind this week.

When I went to college, I got away from the church. I didn't have much of a faith life. While I was still in college, my mom developed cancer. She ended up dying before I graduated, at the age of 48-years-old.

Obviously, it was a difficult time, but I was blown away by the way the church responded. The numbers of people that came and greeted me and my dad and my sister during the calling hours at the funeral home made a huge impact on me.

The memorial service at the church and the reception they hosted was incredible. I had this overwhelming sense that God was reaching out to me through the community. I was completely surprised by this, but I came out of that experience believing there was a place for me in the church.

To this day, I can't fully explain that experience. It's my best guess that the grief and the loss I experienced made me receptive to something I was not ready to accept previously. It created time and space for me to hear the call of God, a call that perhaps I could not have heard otherwise. I've come to think of my mom's death as the birth of my spiritual life. I'll say that if you're not called to parish ministry, it can be a miserable existence. But if you are, there's nothing like it.

That's why I'm convinced there is opportunity in those moments when we're broken, or when our lives are in chaos and disarray, or when our own plans get thrown out the window by the circumstances of life. When it's impossible to go back to the way

life was, that's the right time to ask, "God, what is your desire for me now? What is the new thing to which you are leading me?"

I think Christ's church is asking those kinds of questions, right now. A little over two years ago, things were going along "normally." The pandemic hit and the church's well-ordered existence came to a halt. We were forced out of our buildings. We were forced to connect with people in ways many of us once resisted. As a result, church life is undergoing a reordering. Many churches are branching out in directions they never would have, had it not been for the pandemic.

Lastly, today we will gather around Christ's table to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion. And you know what has to happen in order for the bread to be shared, to be tasted, and to be enjoyed. It has to be broken. That monthly ritual is a continual reminder that with brokenness comes opportunity.