

I recently started seeing a spiritual director, her name is Susan, and she's amazing. Susan has been a pastor and working in various ministry positions for probably as long as I've been alive and is super gracious and wise. During our first meeting together, she asked me about some of my interests as it comes to faith and God, church and spirituality. And I talked about my love and interest in embodied spirituality, meaning that the Spirit is within us, the breath of life, that the word for spirit also means breath and wind. She heard me and agreed with me, and also said, "It's not the Holy Spirit within us, we live within the Spirit of God." (\*mind blown\*) That took me a minute to process. Understanding the Holy Spirit moving and working within us has been such a fundamental part of my spirituality and growth in my faith life for years that, admittedly, because I am human, one of my first reactions was to fight back. And I did a little bit before we changed topics for the rest of our meeting.

But as I started thinking about living within the Spirit of God, and took some time to dig deeper and understand it better, my heart started to change. As I read and prayed and learned more about this, I realized that my view was actually kind of limited. It wasn't wrong, but by understanding the wisdom shared with me by another clergywoman, my understanding of the Holy Spirit grew even more expansive. I was ignoring the "wind" part of the original word for spirit (ruach or pneuma), and focused so much on the "breath" part that I couldn't see beyond that narrow view. Susan helped me to expand my view, and now seeing the Holy Spirit as even bigger and more active than I initially thought is making my life so much richer. My growth and understanding and changing my view is helping me be more aware of the Spirit's movement in the world, and I am absolutely better for this growth and change.

Spiritual directors' jobs are to help you figure out where and how God is working in your life, what you are being called to, things of that nature. The appointments are often centered on deep topics and feel very prayerful. Helping you grow and discern your faith and God's work in the world and your life is literally what they are called there to do. And it can be challenging and vulnerable to have your faith grow in such a short period of

time. I know I certainly felt challenged and vulnerable with Susan's revelation about the Holy Spirit.

And that sense of being challenged and vulnerable is not too far off from how the chief priests and Pharisees felt after Jesus' teachings in today's Gospel story.

It shows another situation in which Jesus and the chief priests and Pharisees are at odds, to say the least. Jesus is not subtle in the fact that his parable was about them. The chief priests are once again threatened by Jesus' authority, which came from God, and desperately wanted to hang onto their power. But they recognized that the crowds around them saw and knew Jesus as a prophet, who brought the Word of God to them, and that by God's authority Jesus was teaching, preaching, baptizing and ministering to the community. They feared what the crowd would do if they arrested Jesus like they wanted to.

Let's remember that Jesus, the people in the crowds, the chief priests, and the Pharisees all belonged to the same faith - they were all Jewish folks who worshipped the same God, had shared history of their faithful forebears, and followed the same commandments and promises of God. And yet, when the promises of God became human in Christ Jesus, when something magnificent happened at a new point in time and changed things, these chief priests, the elders, the leaders of the community were hesitant to accept this newness and change. They had built their lives on a foundation of faithful leadership and spent many years teaching and preaching on specific commands and promises of God. It is often hard for many of us to accept when newness and change come about, especially when that newness or change is about something that we hold really dear, something that has provided meaning or purpose in our lives.

But we have to remember a central truth about our faith, about our living God of all time and place - God creates new things, new life out of all things. Even the things that are rejected, the times we feel rejected, and especially the times we need to repent from when we have rejected others, by the power, love, and grace of God, new life will come forth. New life,

new things, new perspectives and people and prayers and ways of being are a gift from God.

There will always be changes in our life, even with things we care deeply about. Some of these changes are good, and some are not so good. The one constant assurance we have in the midst of these changes is God, and God's great love for us. So we must be brave enough to lean on God, even when it's scary, lean on the life-saving love God gives us, and embrace the opportunity to grow and experience newness of life.

There needed to be changes in the way the chief priests and Pharisees were handling things, and Jesus is not subtle about his critiques of them. Jesus told them, by way of the parable, that their ways of exclusion, rigidity, and greed are not what will get them to the kingdom of heaven. Even though they taught in the area of faith, their actions did not reflect what their traditions called for. Jesus even said that the kingdom of heaven would be taken away from them because of their selfish actions - instead the kingdom of heaven would be given to other tenants who are honest caretakers of the land and bounty. Who tended the new life of the crops.

Jesus had God's authority to preach and proclaim this truth, the truth which called out the chief priests and Pharisees, and it scared them. It angered them. And oftentimes when our self-centeredness or wrongdoings are pointed out to us, it makes us feel vulnerable, and we want to fight back or retaliate out of self-preservation. The priests and Pharisees' idea of retaliation was having Jesus arrested. But retaliation is not kind. Retaliation is not what brings the kingdom of heaven closer to us. Retaliation breeds nothing but resentment and violence. Indeed Jesus faced incredible violence, rejection by his own people as they called for his crucifixion, not very long after he taught this parable. We cannot allow violence to rule our actions, our way of being in the world.

But when we are in pain, especially personal pain when our wrongdoings are brought to light, the way we heal from this is having our vulnerability met with kindness and understanding. It's why we absolutely have

forgiveness paired with confession when we state both at the beginning of our worship services. It's why God's love for the rejected, then became the cornerstone of a whole new world. This new world is built on love, on God's grace and mercy and justice and forgiveness. It is only by God's authority that newness comes forth in power.

Who or what have you rejected in your life that is worth a second look? Where can forgiveness and empathy create new life? What can now be seen as amazing, after first being rejected?

I pray, dear friends, that you are brave enough to learn more about what you have rejected. That you are open enough to growing that you can be changed for the better. That you can embrace people who are rejected, who are on the fringes, who are indeed the ones whom the kingdom of God is built for.

This vulnerability, this growth and change within ourselves is a crucial part of the new life promised to us in the dying and rising of Jesus Christ. Because of God's great love and God's defeat of sin and death on the cross, we are free to learn and grow and daily have a relationship with the world God made. Things centered on sin and death, selfishness and deceit, are what must be rejected for new life to grow forth. And that new life is the hope-filled, never-ending, life-saving gift that is given to us every single day by the power of Jesus Christ. We always have the ability to repent of our rejection and anger and wrongdoing and turn instead towards love of God and neighbor.

In one last bit of Susan wisdom I will share with you today, she said, "God always invites and calls us to stretch ourselves." How can you stretch yourself for the sake of loving God and neighbor? How can you expand your view to see God's doing in the world? It is only through this growth, this empathy, this love for the world God made that we can begin to heal what pains us. For this ability to grow, for the authority that Jesus Christ has over our world, for the unending love of God that makes even the tenderest new life possible, we give unending thanks and praise. Amen.