

Gospel Reflection: John 15: 1-8
Sunday, April 29, 2018
St. Joseph Church, Seattle WA
Ann Alokolaro

As a first semester college student, I had to learn the hard way that I am someone who needs structure to be successful. I tend to be kind of all over the place, and I am easily distracted. Ask my husband what it's like having a conversation with me.

In college, I was on my university's cross country and track teams, which took a lot of time out of the day. That first semester I took 19 credits, had a job, and met many new friends. I had a lot of fun...so much fun that my grades took a dive, and I was called into the athletic academic office because my grades needed much improvement. So, I put myself on a schedule holding myself accountable for every hour of the day. I also discovered the library ... *that* really changed my life. This new structure worked, and I improved my grades enough to be on the President's List nearly every semester after that first one... I felt I had to be . . . to balance out and make up for that poor first semester.

Running in college ended up being good for me academically because the structure of the schedule helped me see where I could put boundaries between my social life and time for studies. I also learned in my running training how practicing the same movements over and over prepares runners for races. Before every workout and race, we did the same set of drills as part of warm-up. The drills helped improve the ability for our bodies to move most efficiently—the drills/the practice of how to properly move our arms, legs, and feet created muscle memory and prepared our bodies so that when the races came, we didn't need to concentrate on our form—our bodies came to know what to do, and we could just race.

That sense of structure gave me strength and confidence, and has found its way into other parts of my life—including my faith.

Many of us have heard people say that they are “spiritual but not religious.” That's a common statement here in the Northwest. (Look no further than a recent *Seattle Times* article that says this region is the least religious it's ever been) Well, I confess to you today that I am the opposite. I actually think of myself as more religious than spiritual. I struggle with spirituality. I don't always know what it means. Spirituality feels unstructured—a bit like my first semester of college.

But, I am trying to improve this. I work at a Jesuit high school down the street, and like the students, we as adults have many opportunities to grow in our faith—so to help with my growth in spirituality, I even signed up for spiritual direction in the fall with a Jesuit priest at school. However, another confession today, I haven't been back since the fall.

I think one reason I struggle with spirituality is because I am so literal. I don't like role playing. I am not into imaginative prayer. I am horrible at Ignatian contemplation. Contemplation is a form of prayer where we imagine ourselves in a scene in scripture. The closest I am typically

able to imagine myself in scripture is watching myself watch one of the people in the Bible. It's like watching myself on TV.

I feel more comfortable with religious practice where I know what to expect. In Mass or other kinds of liturgy, I can be less self-conscious. It is like the muscle memory habits of my running days. The repetition in religious practices and traditions makes it easier and more natural to pray...to focus (and I need all the help I can get to focus).

To reign myself in and focus, I like checking things off lists that hold me accountable and make me feel like I have accomplished something. Going to Mass—check! Saying my prayers—check! Going to confession and leaving all those sins with God—check and phew! Now, if I can just not think or speak, I will stay in this state of grace... I haven't been able to check this one off yet. I may not always feel the benefit while I am doing these in the moment, but I know in the long run the religious practices help form a spirituality within me, just like how the drills in college helped my racing.

Religion provides structure to my relationship with Christ in a similar way that going for coffee provides structure to my relationship with people. When I meet someone for coffee, I am not actually meeting them for the coffee. I can make myself my own coffee. The coffee date provides the structure to hang out, have conversation, make connections—grow my relationship with someone.

I have come to realize structure isn't always enough, though—that I need both religious and spiritual practices to grow in my relationship with Christ. And in today's Gospel when Jesus tells us to *remain in him as he remains in us*, I think that is what he is saying—Jesus wants us to be in relationship with him—not just as a religious practice but as a living relationship.

Religion gives me the structure to find that spiritual relationship with Jesus.

The religious practices—Mass, traditional prayers, confession, these religious structures have given me a place to find my spirituality and relationship with Christ. Like the muscle memory in running, the religious practices prepare me to make the spiritual relationship my own. Combining both religion and spirituality together have made it possible for me to take on my “life races” ...and for me the big races have been times of suffering, especially the suffering I went through when my mom died from cancer two years ago.

Religion was something for me to hang onto and get me through the deep sadness I felt and ache for my mom I had (and still feel). When my mom was sick, I went to extra masses, said novenas, prayed a lot, prayed that my mom would be healed. This all helped me feel like I was doing something proactive. The religion gave me something to do when I felt powerless. All good things—but sometimes my approach was like attacking a check list.

Yet, somehow as I continued to trudge through my “drills” of religious practice, the structure, unnoticed by me at the time, moved me along to a deeper relationship with Jesus, and I learned to have a more spiritual conversation with Him. I realize in retrospect that I *was* experiencing what spirituality is. I became more receptive to Jesus-- was also able to listen in my prayer in a

way I hadn't before my suffering. And as time went on, including through my long period of grief after my mom died, my prayer changed.

It changed from *my* will for my mom to *God's* will for her. It aligned more with God's will and became clear that God was calling my mom home. Although I wasn't ready, I prayed for a "happy, joyful, grace-filled death for my mom—" which she received. I also prayed for my own peace about her death, which I now have. I realize now that experience was the heart of spirituality, which I received because of the preparation from my religious practice.

Back in college when I was all over the place and doing poorly academically that first semester, it wasn't that I didn't want to learn. The problem is that I didn't use the right structure to help me learn. When I found that structure, I then became more successful and grew into a better approach and relationship to the college experience. So has been true for my faith journey. Christ is already in us. But sometimes we need to remember to look. Perhaps this week we can remember to look, to recognize Jesus within us, and be open to and find ways into a deeper relationship with him.