



247 Broad Street | Red Bank NJ 0770
(732) 747-0446 | www.umcredbank.org

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Catch Your Breath in Times of Exhaustion

You know that feeling when you're so mentally, emotionally, or physically tired that you feel you just don't have anything left to give... but of course, there's something you HAVE to get done! Something that's looming over your head... and you can't let yourself rest and relax... at least not until you've checked it off the to do list?! Yeah, I think we all know that feeling!

I had my worst case of that utter, and debilitating exhaustion in my final semester of seminary at Drew. I was serving a church part time, but still preaching weekly. I was taking four courses, trying to keep up with the readings and approaching the looming final projects and papers. I had signed up to lead worship and offer my senior sermon at the seminary chapel service in front of all of my fellow students, professors, and deans. I was – to say the least – a bit overwhelmed. Because of all I was juggling, and a dose of procrastination, I hadn't seriously started to write my senior sermon until after dinner, the night before I was to deliver the message. And guess what happened... sitting down, exhausted and overwhelmed to a blank computer screen... I blanked! I couldn't put two thoughts together in a meaningful way. After hours of wrestling with words, and allowing myself only two hours of sleep, I headed out to Drew the next morning with the end of my sermon still incomplete, hoping and praying the Holy Spirit would inspire me with some great stroke of genius while I was preaching. Well, I got a little more inspired during the delivery, but not much, and in many ways, my senior sermon fell very FLAT! I learned a great lesson though... when I feel like I've hit a wall... rather than simply pushing through, hoping for something magical to happen, I need to walk away... think about something else, DO something else, spend some time away from the task at hand, so that when I come back to it, I come back fresh, with my mind rested and new ideas flowing.

So, what do you do when you're overwhelmed and exhausted? When life gives you too much to handle? Do you push through, or do you walk away and take a brain break? Do you read a book? Check your Facebook feed? Do you cry...or lash out at others? Maybe you hang out with people, or opt for some alone time? Maybe you just keep your nose to the grindstone and keep trying to power through.

In our scripture this morning, I think we find our disciples in a state of emotional overload! After learning by Jesus' side for three years, witnessing his death, and being visited by the resurrected Lord, they were tired and overwhelmed! After all, it was a lot to take in! And now, even though the risen Christ keeps popping up in the story, the disciples are on their own... Jesus is no longer with them in the same way as their spiritual and missionary leader. It was time for the disciples to go out and do the work that Jesus had trained them to do. In the previous chapter of John's gospel, the resurrected Christ says to them "As my Father sent me, so I send you.... Receive the Holy Spirit." Yet our scripture begins with Peter telling the other disciples, "I'm going fishing". I'm pretty sure that's not the task Jesus was sending him to accomplish.

A few other disciples decided they'd go fishing with him. Maybe a night out on the lake would calm the mind. Goodbye overwhelming confusing world, good bye exhausted feeling. Hello fishing.

When we think of fishing, we imagine fishing poles and lures, a nice calm lake and the peace and quiet that calms almost any nerves. But fishing in Peter's day was a whole different ballgame. They had large nets, which would take multiple people to maneuver, and unpredictable waters that could change on the turn of a dime. Maybe fishing wasn't the greatest idea to relax. Here were these once-professional fishermen and after working all night long, after already being exhausted, they caught nothing. The more they cast the nets, the more frustrated they became, coming up empty.

I know that when I am exhausted and worn out, I get frustrated, and the agitation just increases when things don't work out the way I had wanted. Much like the disciples, we live in a world that is overwhelming and exhausting.

Author and pastor Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor articulates this well when she wrote "I do not mean to make an idol of health, but it does seem to me that at least some of us have made an idol of exhaustion. The only time we know we have done enough is when we are running on empty and when the ones we love most are the ones we see the least. When we lie down to sleep at night, we offer our full appointment calendars to God in lieu of prayer, believing that God—who is as busy as we are—will surely understand."

We would never ask our cars to run on an empty tank of gas but ourselves? Sure, we can push through one more thing on our to do list, one more meeting for work, one more appointment on our calendar. We keep going and going and our nets keep coming up empty. Many of us are overwhelmed and exhausted.

But just as dawn was breaking, the disciples glimpse a figure out the beach who somehow knew they hadn't caught anything. The guy on the shoreline yells, "Give it another try... but this time, cast the net to the other side of the boat." So, they did. And the net got so full they couldn't even haul it in.

Who was this miracle man on the beach? One fisherman figured it out pretty quickly. "It is the Lord!" John cries out. When everyone gets to shore, Jesus welcomes them all and says, "Bring over some of those fish you just caught." And there, after a tiring night, they

share a meal of freshly cooked fish and broken bread on the shoreline... a meal to restore and refuel... through both food and fellowship.

If I had continued reading the gospel story, we would have heard that at the end of their meal, Jesus asked Peter three times "Do you love me?" To which he said, Yes Lord! And Jesus responded, "Feed my lambs, tend and feed my sheep." And then simply, "Follow me." In the face of the disciples' soul deep exhaustion, Jesus took time to share some time away with them, to rest and refuel... and then called them to task... reminding them of what was important. Based on the foundation of our love for God, we are called to tend the sheep, feed the lambs, and follow Jesus. What they are called to do, starts first with what is in their hearts!

When we find ourselves drowning in our to do lists, overwhelmed by the responsibilities we take on, exhausted by the amount of things we need to accomplish, may we follow the example set in our scripture and take time to rest, refuel, connect with the heart of our calling, and from there, decide our next steps.

In her work on vulnerability and shame, Brené Brown has found that people often find themselves in overwhelming situations, driven to exhaustion because, for one reason or another, we can't say NO, or we fail to maintain healthy boundaries. Through her research and what she's uncovered about those she labels "wholehearted," rather than simply pushing through in times of exhaustion, she has developed a practice she calls DIG deep... D,I,G... Deliberate, Inspired, and Get Going. When she's exhausted and overwhelmed, she gets...

Deliberate in her thoughts and behaviors through prayer, meditation or simply focusing on her intentions;

Inspired to make new and different choices;

Get Going. Taking action to live into her calling.

Sometimes that Deliberate, Inspired, and Get Going attitude will provide new fuel for the task already at hand, but sometimes it might lead to setting aside a task in order to pick up another, or simply to take some time for rest and refueling.

As we go about our week – I'm sure some of us will encounter times of exhaustion and overload... some of us might already be there! Rather than simply buckling down and pushing through, I invite us instead to DIG deep... be deliberate through prayer and reflection, get inspired to make intentional choices, and to get going, taking action to live in a way that is faithful and loving to ourselves and others. In our times of exhaustion, may we be able to catch our breath, dig deep, and re-center our hearts and lives on what matters most, the love we find in God, lived out in and through our lives. May it be so. Amen.