

After the Sigh
Reading from the Old Testament: Jeremiah 23:1-6
Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 9:35-10:8

After the sigh. It's a painful place to be; but a hard place to get out of. Some action is called for that may require significant and sustained effort of muscle or mind or heart or emotion or all of the above. Just the thought of it promotes whelmed to overwhelmed and demotes energy to lethargy, and wouldn't you know it, "crastination" turns pro. Sigh, the wordless lament that combines deep breath and groan, offered with just enough volume to remind yourself, and passive-aggressively anyone around you, that the burden of effort before you is onerous, far out of proportion to your ability and stamina, and maybe, just maybe, a little self-pity comes to visit, too.

Have I told you that I don't like running in the summer? I do it, but I don't enjoy it. When the temperature at dawn is within whispering distance of 80 and the humidity surpasses 1000%, running, for me, ceases to be a spiritual discipline and becomes more of a Protestant version of purgatory. At a point far too early in the run, I find myself lamenting the effort of each block, groaning at the thought of the many blocks still to go, and cursing every hill as godforsaken. Each 100 yards

feels like a mile and even the slightest incline feels like heartbreak hill. If I weren't so ridden with runner's guilt, I'd lie down and take a nap right out there beside the road.

Sigh. The mountain of forms to fill out; the insane reading assignment or sleep-robbing term paper; the acre to mow; the marathon of Zoom meetings to endure; the third, fourth, or fifth coat of paint awaiting your brush; the looming deadline over the empty page; the first of eight interviews; surgery plus rehab; a post-covid business survival plan; rewriting the resume ... again; the simmering silence between estranged friends, family members, or spouses; the task of healing racial wounds and inequities; anything attached to the word politics; the to-do list for Christ's church. Sigh.

The sigh is so easily followed by paralysis, and thus, we just put off the pain of launching whatever it is we have to do. It's like hiding the starter's gun to delay the race. It's like your seven-year-old's version of Joe Piscopo in the classic snl sketch with *The Whiner's* - "Do I have to?" Overwhelmed and undermotivated. Just getting started may be the hardest part because the finish line is so far out of sight. "The harvest is rich, but the laborers are few."

Today, we find Jesus prepping for a staff meeting, his agenda formulated by the flurry of activity that has kept him on the move for days. Rather than taking few days of vacation after the taxing effort of his dissertation on the Mount, Matthew reports that Jesus healed a leper. Then he responded to a 911 call from a Roman centurion in Capernaum and heals his servant. With hardly enough time to put on a clean face mask and reach for the hand sanitizer, he finds himself as the only attending on call at a crowded impromptu health clinic set up in Peter's house where patient after patient leaves with a clean bill of health. Then Jesus leads a training class on the rigors of discipleship, and on his way to his next appointment, he pauses long enough to still a storm ... no biggie!

Time for a break? Nope! Jesus is soon healing the Gadarene demoniacs, and in the process, angering pig farmers everywhere. Then he cures a paralytic, recruits a disciple, teaches a class on the spiritual discipline of fasting, brings a little girl back to life, mends a long-suffering woman's infirmity, and follows that up by giving sight to two blind men and giving speech to a person who was mute. And then ... and

then! Matthew tells us Jesus goes on tour, preaching revivals and opening health clinics in every town and village.

Whew! Okay, time for the staff meeting, and they're taking attendance: Peter, Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James, Thaddeus, Simon, Judas.

The rosters of the apostles in Matthew and Luke don't match, and in spite of many efforts to synchronize them, forcing the lists to harmonize isn't fruitful. More than the names, what is significant here are the number present and the title given. 12 apostles: the number referring to the 12 tribes of Israel, symbolically reconstituted here as a sign of the kingdom of God; the title, apostle, signifies those who would witness the physical presence of the resurrected Christ. Later, Paul will lay claim to the title because of his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus Road. The word apostle means, *sent out*, and thus, represents the formation and mission of Christ's church.

So, what is Jesus' charge to the church? "As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons."

Say what? Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons? Geez, Jesus, why not throw in - run faster than a speeding bullet, hit the gym until you're stronger than a locomotive and can leap tall buildings with a single bound? Jesus, could it be that you have not actually read my resume?

Jesus' job description for the church sounds impossible. And guess what? It is! It is impossible and would remain that way were it not through the power and presence of the living God, revealed in Jesus, and active in the Holy Spirit.

We have a group of young moms who have committed to the task of reading straight through the Bible this year, and they are far enough along to know that the Bible is surely no record of superhuman faith warriors unfettered by mortal weakness or moral inadequacy. The story, the covenant, the promise moves forward by the strength, vision, and mind of God in spite of human failings, incompetence, pride, jealousy, fear, negligence, and weakness. In spite of our faults, God lifts us to the purpose of Christ's love and propels us toward the goals of Christ's kingdom. The Psalmist exults, " He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making

my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord."

It is through the presence and power and love of the triune God, that Christ's job description for the church, though it will never become manageable, can be taken seriously and pursued with ardor and order and hope. The prophet Isaiah inquires: "Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

The prophet's image should assure us that we can take those daunting first steps in the face of whatever difficult challenges and seemingly intractable obstacles lay before us. He gives power to the faint and strengthens the powerless ... They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." We must cling to that truth for these are consequential times that call for serious minds to confront weighty, long

ignored issues that if put off any longer will simply undo us, allowing the common good to evaporate like dew on a summer morn.

For some time, the youth groups of South Mecklenburg Presbyterian, predominately white, and C.N Jenkins Presbyterian, predominantly black, have hoped to bring the two groups together to build relationships and share activities, but so often, logistics get in the way. It's a challenge to get from Bryant Farms Rd. to Statesville Avenue. Oh, I pray that they can get together, but maybe first, we need to examine why that distance is there, why we live so far apart.

Urban sociologists use a measure called a dissimilarity index to quantify segregation: the percentage of blacks that would have to move to ensure equal dispersion across a city. As late as 2010, the dissimilarity index was 70%. Since 2000, the number of poor Americans who live in areas of concentrated poverty has increased by 57%. And black children are seven times as likely as white children to experience this more corrosive form of poverty. *The Economist* points out that "concentrated disadvantage becomes deeper disadvantage" There is "a mountain of evidence linking life in such neighborhoods to worse

outcomes for health, education, income and risk of incarceration." (*The Economist*)

Look again at Jesus' job description for the church: "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons." Look closely at that list without getting caught up in some theatrical televangelist's interpretation of it. What is Jesus asking for the church to do? Every one of those tasks is basically about seeking the welfare of our neighbors. Cure the sick (*health care*), raise the dead (*bear hope to those places where hope has died, i.e. affordable housing, education, and opportunity*), cleanse the lepers (*understanding how leprosy was experienced in the Bible, this is about inclusion, proximity, hospitality - the antithesis of not-in-my-back-yard NIMBYism*), cast out demons (*Imagine how much pain could be mitigated, so much tragedy that could be avoided if we just focused more attention and resources and effort toward mental health*).

The pain in the streets is real; the conversations before us are hard, but indifference is just too easy, and failing this moment will be costly. In 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King, architect and advocate of nonviolence, observed, "I think America must see that riots do not

develop out of thin air. In a real sense our nation's summers of riots are caused by our nations winters of delay."

In 1961, late at night in a North Carolina kitchen, a student told the late Rev. William Sloane Coffin his story of a sit-in at a Greensboro lunch counter. The student reported, "The five of us came in and sat down on what empty stools were there. Pretty soon the man behind the counter slipped out. In the mirror I could see the crowd begin to gather on the sidewalk outside. Then the other folks on the stools began to go out whether they had finished or not, and without paying, seeing there was no one left to pay.

The five of us moved together for a little warmth. Then in the mirror I was relieved to see the police. But no sooner had they appeared than they disappeared, deliberately. That was the signal. The crowd began to come in. You could just smell their anger. Some of them began to shout insults into one of my ears while from the other side a guy starts to blow cigarette smoke into my eyes. I'm gripping the counter. Then the guy with the cigarette puts it out on the back of my hand. I think I'm going to faint. Then I feel a knee in the middle of my back, then an arm around my neck. Someone is pulling my hair, hard. Pretty

soon I'm on the floor, trying to stay curled up in a ball. They were really kicking us. When we were practically unconscious, the police reappeared and arrested all five of us lying on the floor for disturbing the peace. In jail they roughed us up some more, just for good measure. Then came the best part. When I got out, I called home and my mother told me, 'Good Negroes don't go to jail.' (William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*) Coffin said he couldn't remember the student's name, but the student had made it easy for Coffin to get on a bus for a freedom ride the following month.

Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.
The work is still before us. The time is now. The harvest is rich. The laborers are few. Come, let us serve the Lord. Amen.