

“Flip the Switch”

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Ephesians 6.10-20

John 6.56-69

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Many years ago, I heard that every night before going to bed President Barack Obama would choose his outfit for the next day and lay out his clothes. This was based on the knowledge that our brains can only withstand so many decisions in one day. Decision fatigue is real and happens when we have had to make too many decisions in one day. This could mean large decisions and smaller decisions. After a while, our brain cannot handle any more.

We often make decisions without even realizing it. We ask ourselves if we should take the direct route to Meijer or the back route. We choose what book to read, or a variety of other small, but daily options. After a day of decision making we can have decision fatigue.

Perhaps the most common example of decision fatigue comes at the end of the day. You might have experienced this decision fatigue if you are asked, “What do you want for dinner?” and the response is shrugs all around. This can be a silly way decision fatigue shows up, but also a very common and serious example. I believe people under great stress, especially those living in poverty, often are faced with too many decisions in one day just to survive and suffer from this fatigue. People who are food insecure or house insecure, or simply making it paycheck to paycheck often have to make daily decisions that those with more privilege do not have to think about too much. For example, a person in poverty spends mental energy piecing together transportation and childcare and meals and maybe even housing. It takes more emotional energy to figure out how to make it to work with a bus or a ride from a friend than which car to drive. So, by the end of the day, when decision fatigue sets in, a drive-thru dinner is easiest, but maybe not the most economical.

So, let’s go back to the story of President Obama. He would say he chose his outfit each night because, as president, he had many important decisions in one day. His outfit would be one less decision he had to make that next morning, and he could spend his energy with more important decisions. Though, sometimes, even when we plan, we don’t have control over how many decisions pop up in our day, and can still be overwhelmed.

When pandemic began, I pared down my decision making to the essentials. Slowly, as we became more accustomed to staying at home and masking and doing all the pandemic things, I added more decisions back into my daily routine. Even now, I would say very few of us are back to 100% of where we were before pandemic began. We still have many decisions to make in a day, and we have to remember to bring masks and distance and all of this takes brain energy, emotional energy, and headspace. This doesn’t even mention the fact that we are always reading and watching the horrible events happening in our world every day. All of this can be overwhelming.

Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber, a minister in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, is one of my favorite current theologians. In a recent newsletter that she writes weekly, she described the electrical system in an apartment she once inhabited. This apartment was older and the electrical system had not been updated. If she plugged in too many modern appliances she would blow a fuse and have to flip the switches. She wrote: “The system would shut down when modernity asked too much of it.” Bolz-Weber wrote this commenting on how overwhelming the world is right now, and that it is ok to just focus on one or two things in this space. The news this week, this past month, this past year to almost two years has been devastating and heart breaking. If you find it all overwhelming, if you find your system shutting down when it’s all too much, you are not alone. Our finite minds and emotional states were not set up for all of this and it’s ok to take some deep breaths, step back, and find rest.

I mentioned the story of laying out clothes and the overwhelming state of decision making and taking in so much information because the Ephesians passage is about putting on clothes – specifically armor – in preparation for a world that is too much to bear at times. Systemic injustice is everywhere we look and we can feel crushed by the weight of the world. Whether we lay out our clothes the night before or make that decision in the morning, we all make that decision – and the scripture passage reminds us to be intentional with our decisions. Of course, the author of Ephesians isn’t talking about matching our belt to our shoes but to take something as simple and daily as choosing our clothes to be a reminder of how we live our lives. When we put on a belt, we remember that we are called to be truth tellers. When we pull a sweater on over our head we remember the faith in which we believe. Theologian Fred Craddock wrote that these can be whittled down to justice and peace.¹ If we start the day being deliberate about making our actions and words full of justice and peace we can accomplish so much in this world.

We have followed the Gospel of John’s sixth chapter for weeks now and we have heard about justice and peace and abiding in the truth of God when we feast together of God’s bread of life. We saw how Jesus fed the multitude, and then he described to them the difference between physical bread and metaphorical or spiritual bread. People have asked him questions, not understanding this metaphor. We have finally come to the end of Jesus’ sermon about bread and we see that some people have either become so confused or so offended they have left the group. Jesus asks them, “Does this offend?” He wonders if others will leave because of taking offense, too.

Sometimes, Jesus’ word is offensive. The words of truth and justice are not always easy for us to hear – but they are essential to work together for the inclusion of all God’s people. When we are offended we often have two responses: fight or flight. People who are offended can become offensive and fight back or decide to simply leave. A third option we often forget is that we can pause, step back, take some deep breaths, and ask questions or push back a bit to learn more.

¹ Fred Craddock, John Hayes, Carl Holladay, and Gene Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: B.* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1993), 389.

Another one of my favorite quotes from Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber is from one of her books, which I cannot always remember which book – but I use this quote all the time. When she was serving as minister of a church in Colorado called House for All Sinners and Saints she would ask her congregation: “What will you do when I offend you?” She didn’t ask “*if*” I offend, but when.

I love posing this question, because we are all human. In all our relationships, even with the best of intentions, we will sometimes offend one another. If we can decide how we will respond before we enter that space of being offended, before we hit decision fatigue, before we need to flip the switches in the breaker box, we will make healthier decisions and be able to see the way God is working in a difficult situation. If we covenant to take some deep breaths, to make sure we are taking Sabbath and spending time with God, and to reflect before we speak, and ask questions when we’re offended rather than leaving in anger, then I believe we can make sure our spiritual breaker boxes are ready to handle what comes our way.

This doesn’t mean we won’t be overwhelmed at times. It doesn’t mean the journey will be easy. We see time and again that Jesus calls the disciples to difficult, challenging work in the world. We are also called to that work and sometimes we will find ourselves struggling. We can trust that we are not alone – that God is with us and that you are surrounded by a community of faith who care for you and support you.

This week, check your spiritual breaker box. Are you feeling overwhelmed by the world? Are you overwhelmed by daily decisions? What do you need to be rejuvenated? The fall is always a busy time – especially in a college town. So we have to care for ourselves as a new and exciting season begins. It means being intentional about how we gather, how we spend our time and energy, and how we care for one another. May you be blessed in the knowledge that you are loved by God, and that our Creator gave you specific gifts to focus your time and energy on specific tasks in the world. Amen.