

“What We Can’t Carry”
By Rev. Katrina Pekich-Bundy
Romans 5.1-5
John 16.12-15
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I have told you a few times that I am an INFJ on the Meyers-Briggs. That means I am an introvert, I am intuitive, I’m a feeler, and I am judging, which means that I am a decision maker. I score highest on the feeling scale because I feel my emotions immensely. I also love to talk about feelings. When I ask someone, “How are you?” I genuinely want the real answer, not the social expectation of, “Fine.” I like to talk about what I’m feeling, I’ll ask others what they’re feeling, and then we can process those feelings. I am incredibly difficult to live with. I’m always asking my family what they’re feeling. Are you happy? Are you sad? How does that feeling manifest in your body? Sometimes, my processing of feelings is too much for my family to bear. They process differently and honestly just want to play with their toys rather than talk to mom about feelings. I try to keep that in mind.

Sometimes there are things that we simply cannot bear. I’m offering a small example to you - my family cannot bear my desire to do emotional work all the time - with good reason. I also recognize that perhaps, as the mama bear, I often want to hold those emotions for them when they are too much to bear.

Our world is experiencing more than we can carry anymore. The war in Ukraine continues. Mass shootings happen almost daily. The January 6th hearings have begun. Pandemic continues. There are shortages of materials and foods, and inflation means less money in the pockets of those who were already working twice as hard for less money. This is on top of the personal trials we go through regularly. It is just too much. Our bodies and minds were not meant to carry this much trauma.

What can we do about it? Try as we might, we cannot stop the world. We have no control over the events of the world. We can turn off the news. We can put down the newspaper. Yet this all keeps happening whether we pay attention or not, and isn’t it better to at least be aware? How do we pay attention without absorbing it all?

This past week we finished reading *Unsettling the Word*, a book written by Indigenous people to decolonize the Bible. It has been such a heavy and emotional read. It has also been a very important read. Each week as we open our books we sort of took deep breaths, knowing that this was emotionally exhausting and necessary - and that it was even more emotionally exhausting for those who live it every day and tell their stories. We continued to read, even though it was uncomfortable, even though it was in the midst of what seemed like the world being on fire.

This past Wednesday, we started by talking about books we read for fun. We chatted about the books we grew up reading. We laughed a bit. We went back into the book. We took a break, we laughed some more, and we re-entered. It is a privilege that we can take a break from the impact of colonialism. It is a privilege that we can take a break from the difficult feelings. Sometimes we have to, but it is important that at some level, in some way, we keep engaging.

A few years ago I attended the General Assembly in St. Louis. It was the last in person General Assembly before pandemic hit. I was serving as a commissioner and was sitting in committee one day before the plenaries had started. A young Black man spoke up and talked about the struggles of Black ministers in the PCUSA. He said that most Black ministers served small Black congregations, and therefore were not full time, and as a result, did not receive the

Board of Pensions healthcare or pension. This is a systemic problem. He asked this room to listen to his ideas. To listen to his reality. It had been a long couple of days, and someone in the committee said, "It's almost lunch time, let's come back to this later."

The reality, though, was that if we paused for lunch, this room of predominantly white people could put this uncomfortable truth aside for a little while, and most likely wouldn't revisit. I've been in too many committees where this has happened, and those who are trying to speak up are ignored and pushed aside over and over again. Instead, someone else spoke up and said, "We have the privilege of pushing pause on this conversation. Our friends of color can't escape it." So, we put off lunch, and came up with a proposal for the Board of Pensions to consider. That led to an announcement this year that there are more supplements for people of color and more grants available. It's not where we want to be, but it is a start.

Sometimes we rest, sometimes we push forward. I think about what we are able to bear as we read our Gospel reading today. This is Trinity Sunday. It's a fancy way of saying it is the only other Sunday outside of Pentecost that we intentionally talk about the Spirit. Well, it's more than that, but I'm very aware that we don't talk about the Spirit too much in our denomination. I often believe it is because it is the hardest to understand, the hardest to grasp, because it is the least talked about in the Bible and is not a physical being we can see. The Spirit is more experiential, more feeling-oriented, harder to control.

The Trinity is a concept that came after the Bible. The word "trinity" doesn't appear anywhere in the Bible, but was a theological concept that came later. As theologians read scripture and noted these three entities - God, Jesus, and the Spirit, they had arguments over whether or not these entities were connected or if they were separate. The debates usually ended up saying that if they were separate, they believed in three gods, which was then considered heresy. So, the Trinitarian theology for Reformed Christians states that God, Jesus, and the Spirit are three entities that are of the same substance. They are linked relationally in a way we cannot always understand. The Trinity, and the Spirit, are often the biggest mysteries in our faith, because they are hard to describe. Very few metaphors can truly encompass what it means for God, the Christ, and the Spirit to be separate and the same.

So, in the Gospel of John, we read about Jesus speaking to the disciples. And Jesus has so much he wants to say to them. He probably is a bit tired because he finds himself repeating the same message over and over: a message in which he will die, and rise again, and the Spirit will be sent. However, this seems to be all that the disciples can carry. This is all they have space for in that time. Jesus recognizes this is all that can be said in that time, in that space.

The world doesn't have that sort of understanding of humanity. The world doesn't realize we're all just making it day by day and could use a break from all the stress that comes at us. Perhaps that is why Jesus sent the Spirit. In Romans 8 we are told that the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. When we don't have the words, the Spirit understands our mumbles, our grumbles, our fits and screams and sighs. We don't have to use words - the Spirit understands, and I appreciate that because anymore when I watch the news, all I can do is shake my head.

The Romans passage we read today, though, doesn't come from chapter 8, but from chapter 5. It's one that I think can be taken out of context, or could be used to harm. Paul wrote this letter to the Romans, and he was a boaster. He talks very confidently in nearly every letter he wrote. He is telling his readers that suffering is good - because suffering creates endurance, and endurance leads to character, and character leads to hope, and hope never disappoints.

Whenever I read this passage I think of that grandfather who said things like, “mowing the lawn builds character!” It feels like a way to trick someone into doing a task they don’t want to do. Maybe mowing the lawn works for this passage. Sometimes we need some motivation to do the hard tasks of the day. When I started out as a runner, it took some suffering of my muscles to build up to run farther and farther. It took some pain, some falls, some sprained ankles, some practice to arrive at my goals.

This is all well and good if we’re talking about mowing the lawn or sports, but that isn’t what Paul is talking about. Paul is talking about the struggles that Christians are enduring. This is a different time, though. Christians in the United States do not face these same struggles or suffering. So, I think perhaps we need to look at it from the perspective of who *is* struggling in our world. Who *is* struggling in our country? If this passage brings hope, may God bless it. Yet, let’s not lean on this scripture as a means of continuing the suffering of others. Let’s not look at it and assume, “it’s ok, it builds character,” but actually try to change the suffering in this world. Let’s see the ways in which hope doesn’t disappoint rather than rejoicing in the character part of this.

I mentioned before the Trinity is relational. The Spirit, God, and the Christ work together in mysterious ways, but also remind us of how to behave - that we are relational and connected. When one person in our community hurts, we all hurt. When one of us suffers, we all suffer. We are separate, but connected.

I wonder what you are carrying that is too much to bear right now. I wonder if you can release it to God, just slightly, in a sigh too deep for words. I wonder if you are able to extend a listening ear, a space, a comforting gesture, to someone who cannot bear it anymore. Know that you can rely on the Spirit. Even if it is just for a moment, so we can pick it back up again and regain our strength, the Spirit is there to support. May it be so. Amen.