

For the Tired Pastor...

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Hebrews 12:1-2

"...since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses..."

Movement 1 – It is Hard Work to be a Pastor

Did anyone tell you it would be this hard? Did anyone tell you that you would face hardships, stress, difficulties, and challenges? When you said “Yes” to God and accepted the call, what was your vision of ministry? What kind of picture of ministry were you served by others? Were you told about a kind of 1950s happy-go-lucky kind of vocation? The kind when the pastor is actually a respected member of the community, the days when people went to church out of a sense of obligation and duty, the days when it meant something to be a Methodist, a Presbyterian, a Lutheran, or a Baptist (kinda). Were you fed this dream, this idea? Maybe you went into seminary with this picturesque dream, and left seminary with a greater dream of serving that perfect church surrounded by a white picket fence where each family has 2.5 children and all you have to do is preach, visit the sick, and serve on one community board. It is an enticing idea of what it may mean to serve a church.

Maybe you did not come from such a Pollyanna place of idealism. Maybe you came from a place more fitting of our generation, a place of skepticism, of cynicism, and cautious questioning. Maybe you felt pulled into the ministry, kicking and screaming, but you know that this is where you are supposed to be serving. You knew the trends found in today’s vocation. Pastors work long hours for little pay. You knew that to be a pastor would be demanding on your family and loved ones. You knew that there would be a lot of stress, a lot of challenges, and a lot of hurdles. You have even heard Stanley Hauerwas lament about the role of the pastor when he said, “...few people believe an incompetent minister can damage their salvation.” (From the Hauerwas reader, p. 611) You know that the pastor is no longer respected in the community. You came into the ministry with caution, ready for the hardships, but still willing to serve.

I wonder, if you came from either place, or from someplace in the middle, did you find yourself one day caught off guard with the demands, caught with the work to do, and found yourself saying, “no one told me it would be this hard.

Maybe it happened that one day when you were in the church, the roof has sprung a leak, the boiler isn’t working, your deacons have decided to have a special, emergency meeting in the evening to decide whether to serve hoagies or heroes or subs, and it is imperative that the pastor be present. Mrs. Jones just stopped by to complain about the margins and the fonts in the bulletin. Mr. Henry just called worrying about who will clean the communion cups after service, you have a pile of work on your desk, three sick people to visit, a sermon to prepare, and then you get a phone call from that sales person. Have you ever received that phone call? Usually it is a salesperson calling from Texas with a sunny disposition and the perfect package solution for your church. Have you received that phone call? Especially just after you have just witness the crumbling of your ministry around you, the phone rings, you answer and the first thing you hear is, “well pastor, isn’t it just a blessing to serve the Lord?” Which explicative do you like to use first in response to such a question?

Did anyone tell you that it would be this hard? Are there days when you felt like maybe you have been duped into serving the Lord in the church that the challenge that is nothing like what you expected when you planned to enter into the ministry?

Now I am not calling you to trash your church, I am asking you to be realistic which me. Have there been times when you wondered what it is you got yourself into? Have there been times when you found yourself saying, this is harder than I expected. Have there been times when you felt like a solitary individual in a bog of chaos and demands pulling at you every which way. There have been those times for me, and I am sure there have been those times for you.

Has there ever been a time when you found yourself wondering why no one told you that it would be this hard?

Movement 2 – The Lure of Despair

Maybe at those moments you found yourself feeling the lure, the pull, the seduction of despair. Is this the danger we all worry about? Do you ever find yourself worrying and wondering about the dreaded burnout? I once meet a president of a bank who told me, “Yes I went to seminary, and served in a church for about two years, but then I read the writing on the wall and realized that I was not right for the ministry.” I hear these people, and I want to ask them “what was the writing on the wall?” How did you know that you were not ‘meant’ for the ministry? How did you know that you were heading towards burnout? Was it an anger you have towards your denomination for holding down and holding back the ministry, and the growth of the body of Christ? Was it the anger you had at the ministers who served the church before you, who coasted through a comfortable ministry and left a mess for you to clean up? Was it the desire you have every now and then to give the church and the denomination the metaphorical finger, and shout an explicative in their general direction? Are these the signs of burnout, are these the signs of despair that overwhelm us all? I worry about despair.

I wonder about the community that first read this letter. The early Christians who found that profound hope in Jesus Christ, and wanted to follow him, but did not know how hard it would be to walk with Jesus. I wonder if they were in the point of despair when they gathered around to hear the words of guidance and assurance offered in this letter. They had tried to follow Jesus, but they wondered if it meant to be excluded from their Jewish roots. Did one truly have to reject Judaism to fully follow Christ? Did they have to reject their family, their tradition, and their loved ones for the sake of Jesus Christ? I can only imagine that the persecution, the shame, and the mocking must have worn down those to whom this letter was written. I can imagine them saying, “I didn’t think it would be this hard.” I can imagine them brushing with despair in their faith.

There is a lure, a danger of falling into despair. There is a danger of being sucked in so deeply that you lose hope, you lose your sanity, and it seems like you lose your soul. We will all have that Tillichian moment when we realize the finite nature of our abilities, and we realize that we cannot do everything that needs to be done, and we come to the edge of despair as it teases us, calls us, and lures us. I worry about despair.

Yet I once heard of a young clergywoman who stood up at a gathering, and speaking to the issue of burnout, she said “I am tired. I am worn down. But I am not worn out, I am not burnt out.” These words caught me and challenged me. It seemed to me to be an important distinction that I am tired, but I am not burnt out. These words told me that it is ok to be tired. It is ok to need rest.

The words left me wondering, where I could look, where I could go to find the strength, not to keep me from getting tired, but to keep me from falling into despair and burning out? Where could I find the guidance to continue with my ministry and to avoid the threatening despair? Where can we find such strength? Where can we find such hope? Where can we look for the guidance to this strength and this hope?

Movement 3 – The Hope of the Communion

In the scriptures we are reminded that we are not alone. In the passage read today, we are reminded that we do not traverse the landscape of the world alone, we do not minister in the name of Christ alone, and we do not have to be alone. We are told of a cloud of witness that has gone before us, that go with us and that follow us. We are reminded that we do not go alone.

In his work, *The Communion of the Saints*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer claims that the message of the Gospel, the hope of Jesus Christ, and the ministry of the church is learned, discerned and known through the members of the church itself. That from our brothers and sisters, from our liturgy and our Sunday school lessons we learn about Jesus. William McClendon argues that we learn the very patterns of speech, the way to sing and the way to pray from the faith community that has formed us. We come out of a community and we are part of a

community. We have been formed and shaped and guided by the great cloud of witnesses. We need to remember this.

The early Christians who were reading this letter were reminded that their roots are found in the story of Noah and Abraham, of Isaac and Jacob, of Joseph and Moses. They are reminded of the faith and the witness of Gideon, Samson, David and Samuel. They are reminded of other Christian martyrs who were such strong witnesses for their faith, that they were persecuted for the sake of Christ to the point of death. The early Christians are reminded that all of these individuals, their lives and their stories are a part of that great cloud of witnesses, they are a part of their story, and they are a part of their community. The early Christians are reminded that they are not alone.

We too are a part of a story and a community. We can also remember the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures, how God did not leave Joseph even when he was in prison. How God did not leave Jeremiah even when his friends had betrayed him. How God called Moses and Isaiah. We can remember the ministries and the trials of Peter and of Paul. We can remember the strength and the witness of Felicity and Perpetua, some of the very first martyrs. We can remember these stories and claim these stories as our own. They are all a part of our community and our family. These stories inform us, they guide us and they support us. You are not alone.

You are not alone in your community and your own journey. Maybe you have a mentor who guided you in the faith. Maybe you have a friend who is a part of our support group. Maybe you meet someone in passing who touched you and inspired your own ministry. Maybe you have a hero in the history of Christianity whom you look to for inspiration. All of these people are a part of this great cloud of witnesses, they are all a part of your community and you are not alone.

Remember the saints who have come before us. Remember Martin Luther, remember John and Charles Wesley. Remember Roger Williams, Francis Asbury, Alexander Campbell, and Jonathan Edwards. Remember Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, Martin Luther King Jr., and many, many others. All of these are a part of the great cloud of witnesses, they are a part of your community and you are not alone.

Remember each other. We are all a part of this great cloud of witnesses. We are all a part of this community. This program enforces our community, it grows our community. Scattered across the United States, from the rural South to the metropolitan east to the West Coast we are all working and serving and striving together to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are not alone.

Have you ever seen the movie *High Noon*? In this movie, the main character, played by Gary Cooper, is told that a feared gunman was coming to town to kill him. In desperation, he looks around the town, that he has helped out so often in the past, for help in his time of need. He tries to find someone who will stand with him as he faces danger. Yet everyone turns from him, and he is left alone. Have you ever felt this way? That you have a great challenge facing you, you ask many for help but all decline. Have you ever felt alone? You no longer need to feel alone. Remember that you are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, you are a part of a greater community, and you are not alone.

Movement 4 – Standing with our Ancestors

We stand with those who have gone before us and those who go with us. Our hope is found when we look towards this great cloud of witnesses surrounding us and we rest on them for support and guidance. Walk with community; let this community carry you if necessary, lean on this community for support. From this community, from this cloud of witnesses, we can find our hope.

Do not try to serve the church by yourself, for you will fail. Yet if you rest on the wisdom of people like Thomas Merton or Howard Thurman, and if you let their insights guide your insights you will find hope and you will find strength. Let their spiritual depth and maturity be a witness and a light to you.

Do not try to lead the church into the world by yourself, for you will fail. Rather, look to the wisdom and the leadership of individuals like Martin Luther King, Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer or William Sloan Coffin guide

you. Look to the risks they took, look to the decisions they made, and find hope in their witness. Find hope in their ministry. Let their witness be a light to you.

When you try to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God, let people like Walter Rauschenbusch and Dorothy Day guide your footsteps. Read their writings, learn their story, follow their path and let their witness be a light to you.

I recently read in the history of the church where I am serving that in the first decade, in 1808, they “excluded” 7 of the original 18 members of the church. While I don’t look to exclude people from the church, I admire the tenacity of their commitment to their ministry. Even as their numbers fell, they did not fall from worshipping, from ministering and for doing the work of the Lord. I admire their passion for staying true to the gospel and look to it for an example in my own ministry. Will I be so willing to stay true to the gospel that I would be willing to loose members? Will I be so willing to share the love of Christ with everyone, as I feel called to do, no matter what the race, gender, or sexual orientation that I would loose members? I look to their passion and their dedication as a witness and a light to me.

Do you see what we can do? We can lean on, we can rest on, and we can look to each other for strength, for hope and for assurance. We are not alone, but we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witness. They have gone before us, they go with us, they are behind us, and they guide, support and lead us in our own ministry. When we walk with this cloud of witness, we walk with the whole body of Christ and we walk with, as the late theologian John Yoder describes, the grain of the universe. We walk in the way God intended from the beginning of creation. No alone, but with the whole body of Christ. We are not meant to serve a church by ourselves, but in the great fellowship of Christ.

Movement 5 – Running With Grace

With this fellowship, we can run the race with courage and strength. When we look to this cloud of witness, when we look to each other, we can find again the strength to let go of everything that hold us back. We can find again the strength to let go of everything that slows us down. We can turn our eyes again to the cross and call boldly the people of the world to Christ as God has ordained us to do. We need not allow ourselves to be held down by boards and committees. We need not allow ourselves to be held down by traditions or by customs. We need not allow ourselves to be held down by the way things were or the way things ought to be. We can discard these weights and continue to run to the cross, resting on the witness of those around us before us and behind us.

When I hear from one of you the glories of your ministries, when I hear about what you are doing in your vocation, I find hope for my own ministry. I don’t think why I shouldn’t try it, but I think why not try it. Your witness is an inspiration and a source of hope. When I hear about your struggles and yet your persistence to continue in the work of the Lord, I find hope in my own work. For in each of you I see that the Lord has not left the church. In each of you I see that God is still very much alive in the church, and I have hope for my own work and my own ministry.

You give me the courage to say ‘no’ to the lures and the temptations of the world. The saints before me gives me courage to say ‘no’ to all that in the world which weighs me down as I serve the body of Christ. Because of your witness, because of the witness of the saints, I look to the cross and I continue on that path. I will push the church, I will love the church, and I will ask the church to be a witness to the hope and the glory of the Lord.

Movement 6 – Hope Regained and Hope Lived

Oh my brothers and my sisters, it is a hard thing to be a pastor. It is a hard thing to serve the Lord. We have been, we are being, and we will continue to be wounded by the very ones we love and we serve. Yet do not feel alone. Do not fall to despair but look to each other for hope, look to our story for hope, and finally, look

to the cross for hope. For it is through the revelation of the cross that we know we can cast off every weight which holds us down. It is through the revelation of the cross that we know we can have hope in what we do. It is through the revelation of the cross that we can find courage even in the most despairing situation.

For the boundaries have been broken.

The limitations of the world have been shattered.

A light has shined on the despair of humanity.

Death itself has been beaten and hope has been regained. The story we live, the story we tell, the story we hear is of forgiveness, of hope and of love. We can serve the church, we can serve Christ with those who have gone before us, with those who are with us, and with those who are behind us. We are not alone, but we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witness that we can lay aside every weight that clings so closely and run with perseverance, looking to Jesus.

AMEN