

Let's talk about burnout—14th Sunday after Pentecost

[Jeremiah 15:15-21](#)

[Psalm 26:1-8](#)

[Romans 12:9-21](#)

[Matthew 16:21-28](#)

Today, let's talk about burnout. Volunteer burnout, career burnout, parenting burnout, teen burnout, pastor burnout—faith burnout.

And now with rumblings about a new, vaccine resistant variant of COVID, the life-event for us all that seemed to coalesce our feelings of burnout is back, or, maybe never was truly gone.

Burnout is, of course, the feeling that you can't do this anymore. You used to love what you do... whatever it may have been... but now, because of so many overwhelming factors... you are miserable. Burnout is serious of course—it's not just complaining. It's a place where sucking it up no longer works. It's a place where our very physical and mental health is suffering, all our relationships are suffering, too, because what we once thought was our vocation, our passion, now is destroying us.

And while there is of course work, parent, school burnout, there is also faith burnout.

And faith burnout is, almost always, brought on by the experience of suffering. And while Jeremiah is burned out and the Psalmist is burned out, today, St. Paul in Romans and Jesus in the Gospels are giving warnings about it.

Jeremiah, of course, was a prophet of the ancient Hebrew people. The ancient people of Israel and Judah, just Judah in case of Jeremiah. The people were beset by war and large Empires. And so they tossed away the commands of God in favor of commonsense wartime foreign policy. And, as a prophet, from his very childhood, it was Jeremiah's calling to bring the people back to their trust in God. "You don't need more chariots or more allies," he said. "You might as well just surrender, because isn't God in control."

Everyone hated him because he told the truth. And, naturally, this got Jeremiah in trouble. And Jeremiah in our passage today is mad at God because of that trouble. He, very wisely, does not bottle up his frustration, but vents to God.

"Why is my pain unceasing,
my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed?
Truly, God, you are to me like a deceitful brook,
like waters that fail."

Translation: "I did all the right things, God. Why am I miserable?" "Why do bad things happen to good people, God?" is the modern version.

The Psalmist is barking up the same tree. The Psalmist is reminding God of his good track record, but something is looming. "I have walked faithfully with you. I have not sat with the worthless, nor do I consort with the deceitful. I have hated the company of evildoers; I will not sit down with the wicked."

Why remind God of what God already knows if there's not some serious trial and suffering coming down the road? This is like the person reciting to God all the good they have done when they are waiting to hear the results of a very serious diagnosis.

And when we think that we can convince God with our good deeds to shelter us from suffering we are headed straight for... burnout. First of all, especially as Lutheran-flavored Christians, we don't even believe that that's how God works. God loves us despite what we do, despite what is done to us. God expects us to react to God's goodness, to do good as an echo of grace. This is not a call and response that we, ourselves, begin.

But we so often think that our relationship with God is quid pro quo. It is not. As St. Paul, in an earlier chapter of Romans, writes, "But God proves God's love for us in that while we *still were sinners* Christ died for us." So, we burn out.

Jeremiah is a burnout-poet when he writes: "Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook/like waters that fail." When we expect nothing but blue skies, then God will always appear to us as faulty and fickle.

Speaking from experience, burnout is awful, but when we are supported in this place, it can be a time of disillusionment—but in a good way. A place where we take stock, and shed our illusions. We can't go on; we say when we are burned out. But *why* can't we go on?

In the case of COVID, we never **expected** that bad of a thing to happen. And in the case of COVID and church, we saw how we were hamstrung by hundreds of assumptions and **expectations** about what church was supposed to look like, how it was to be done... and Zoom was not it.

But COVID and church, COVID and this church, caused us to take stock. What *does* matter to us? What *can* we let go of? What *are* our expectations, and how do they square with who God has been revealed to be, to God's people, in Scripture and throughout the history of the Church?

Expectations is the key word. And expectations are what Jesus is talking about with Peter and his disciples in Matthew's gospel. Last Sunday we heard Peter's name-change and confession, that Jesus was the Son of God, the Son of Man vis-a-vis Daniel, the Messiah, the King. Today, come the next verses in Matthew. Jesus says, for God's kingdom, that Messiah must "undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised."

Peter says, "No way." That's not what he **expected**. God, Peter believes, is supposed to shelter God's chosen people from suffering. And Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." And Jesus turns to us all, his disciples, and says these arresting words: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

This is **not** a call to seek out suffering. This does not bless or excuse those who abuse or oppress others, giving them amnesty somehow because suffering is awesome. This is Jesus saying you cannot avoid suffering. But if you try to avoid the pain, you will never understand me, and miss out on who God is.

Of course, hidden in Jesus' response to Peter is some wonderful good news. He says, "on the third day be raised." Jesus does not get burned out, you could say. Jesus passes through the suffering, is transformed by death... and transforms death itself! We hang our hats on that belief. But we're not Jesus, and we continue to get diagnoses, and bad news, and upsets. And our expectations will be broken.

The advice of God to Jeremiah is not unlike the advice of Paul and of Jesus, too. Be steadfast in doing what you know is right. God even says to Jeremiah, you can yell at me. It's ok. I know you're mad now, but "If you turn back, I will take you back... and you shall stand before me." All the hard stuff of the world— "shall not prevail over you, for I am with you," God says. And the Psalmist, despite their worries, still has walked faithfully with God. Paul's advice is extensive, but he says, basically, "Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer." And Jesus says, simply, "follow me."

God's Word promises us a closeness. And when we experience suffering, we question this closeness. We cannot understand it. But be renewed in the trust today, there is no amount of hurt or persecution or confusion or whatever else that can *actually* change just how close God is to us. This is the meaning of Christ.

Amen.