

Long-Haul Christians

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Holy Communion
July 7, 2019

“So let us not grow weary in doing what is right. . . .” – Galatians 6:9a

We’ve all heard of burnout. Some of us have heard of compassion fatigue. In the old days we called it ennui. In moral theology class, we called acedia.

Whatever you call it, it’s the same essential problem: the loss of energy, focus, and enthusiasm for the joy of living the Christian life. Paul had to address that problem as early as the year 50 or so, which is our best guess as to when he wrote his letter to the churches at Galatia, a region of modern-day Turkey. Here’s the way Paul put it: “Let us not grow weary in doing what is right.”

We’d all agree with Paul’s urging, I’m sure, but like much good, sensible advice, it’s easier said than done. HOW to avoid growing weary in the work of doing what is right isn’t always obvious, so this morning I’d like to offer four very practical, memorable, and manageable suggestions for how to preserve your Christian zing. These suggestions are all verbs, and they all start with the letter p; we might call them p-words. They are pray, pick, pace, and party. Those four techniques may help you from becoming a member of that growing body of the formerly religious that sociologists call “the dones.”

Pray. So obvious, so expected from a pastor, and so often neglected in any meaningful way in the Christian life. People often say to me that they don’t know how to pray. That’s always a little baffling to me because it’s like saying that they don’t know how to breathe. Genuine prayer is as natural and spontaneous and necessary to the Christian as breathing in and out. Christians pray because that’s what Christians do. Prayer is the life blood whose circulation keeps us spiritually alive. God communicates with us, we communicate with God. Back and forth, breathing in and breathing out. It’s no accident, I think, that meditation, which is one form of prayer, so often involves paying attention to one’s breathing.

We clergy, I think, bear much of the responsibility for the uncertainty some of us have about prayer. We who lead churches have scripted prayer so firmly into worship and mealtime and bedtime that folks don’t realize that prayer has no script. It has a model – for us Christians that’s the Lord’s Prayer – but a model isn’t a script. A model is simply to provide us with an inspiring example to get us going on our own praying projects.

And one of the most important praying projects a Christian can embark on to avoid burnout is the prayer of discernment. This is the prayer of inquiry not in general, but in very specific terms. This is the prayer in which we ask God to use us in very specific ways for very specific tasks in very specific settings.

It's one thing, for example, to pray for the sick, and we do regularly here as part of our prayers of intercession. But how may God use you for the benefit of this particular individual who is ill? Is it a visit, a phone call, a card, or a casserole? Or what does God want you to do for this particular hospital or rehabilitation center or hospice that needs volunteers? Or is God calling you to assist the injured by supporting first responders? If so, how might you do that?

Get very specific and get very practical in these kinds of prayers of discernment. Most of us bring little more than a pious attitude and a bowed head to our prayers, but sometimes we might do well to bring a pad of paper and a pen as well. Ask God to help you make a list – a list of sick people, a list of hospitals, a list of first responders, or a list of your gifts and skills and experiences, and then ask for God's help in combining those lists into an action plan that will work for YOU. Don't worry about all the stuff you cannot do; leave that to God and to others. Focus your prayerful attention on what You can do, in YOUR setting, with YOUR abilities. That's how prayer becomes eminently useful and practical, not only for those you help, but also for you.

Praying this specifically also helps us not grow weary in doing what is right because it keeps us from wasting valuable time and energy on tasks at which we're not very good or tasks for which we don't have adequate resources. Such prayers of discernment also help keep us from spreading ourselves too thin, so that what should be a life of joyful service becomes a pious rat race.

So praying is the first step in avoiding burnout for the faithful – the first p-word.

The second p-word is pick, and it's what we do after we've prayed. Pick the work of Christian living that fits you best, and practice – that's another p-word for another sermon – practice getting better at what you believe God is calling you to do. Pick your practice we might say.

Have you ever wondered why the three ancient professions of law, medicine, and ministry use the verb "practice" to describe themselves – the practice of law, the practice of medicine, and the practice of ministry? The Oxford English Dictionary says that this verb was used this way as early as 1421, and only about 120 years later do we find it used in the more general sense that we think of today meaning to do something over and over again to become better at it. But my guess is that there is something to this notion of practice in the areas of medicine and law and ministry that does indeed mean that you have to keep at it in order to keep up. None of us ever gets a profession as complicated as medicine or law or ministry – or other professions, for that matter – completely and finally perfect. Such areas of service to human life are constantly growing as we make new discoveries in medicine, as society's views about how to live together through the rule of law evolve, and as our perception of God's call to us changes so that we keep faith meaningful in an ever-changing world.

None of us in these types of work ever reaches the point of saying, I've got it, I've got it all, and I've got it perfectly. We know we need to practice to remain competent to serve, and you do that by picking carefully where you can do your best work.

In the Baptist church we used to sing a hymn, "Bring of Your Best to the Master," and there's very good advice in that. Frederick Buechner, the theological novelist, said "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." It takes time and careful attentiveness to recognize that intersection, and that's the place to pick if you want to avoid growing weary in doing what is right.

So that's the second p-word: pick. Pray first for God's guiding light, and then pick the area where you can serve God's world most effectively.

The third p-word is pace: you have to pace yourselves if you're going to avoid running out of steam.

I wasn't built to run cross-country, but I had friends who were, and from them I've learned that you can't sprint through the long haul. Even though they both involve running, sprinting and marathoning are entirely different undertakings, and success in each of them requires knowing what pace to set.

We Christians always need to remember, if we're to avoid premature fatigue, that we are religious marathoners. We're in this for the long haul. We play a long game, and we're confident that we will win in the end.

In today's passage from Galatians, Paul calls that victory reaping at harvest-time, meaning that, sooner or later, we will reap what we sow. There is a harvest-time, there is a reckoning, there is a tallying up of what we've done with the gift of our "one wild and precious life" in Mary Oliver's words.

"If you sow to your own flesh," Paul writes, "you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit" (v. 8).

Note the capital S on Spirit – it's God's Spirit, not some second version of us distinct from our physical selves. It's the Spirit that moved over the watery chaos and brought forth creation, the Spirit that Jesus embodied as the Christ, and the Spirit that spoke to the churches in the book of Revelation. From front to back, the Bible is about the Spirit of God which operates IN time but is never bound BY time. That's what makes that Spirit eternal, and that's why Paul says that sowing to our own flesh – that is, our own, individual selves – leads to a harvest of corruption, that is, decay. Flesh decays, it wears out, it reaches the end of its life span. If your focus of attention IN this life is ON this life, your time frame is going to be very brief. Even people who live to be over a hundred are nothing more than the tiniest blip on the scale of geologic or astronomic time, and neither of those vast scales of time comes close to divine time.

So pace yourself in doing the right thing so that you don't wind up in the break-down lane with steam coming out from under your hood. Pace is the third p-word, after pray and pick.

Finally, the fourth p-verb is party, that is, celebrate. Much of what energizes life is celebratory – births, confirmations, first dates, proms, marriages, anniversaries, new homes, new jobs, retirements – and doing right is one of those things to be celebrated because it shows that we're listening. We're headed in the right direction. We're not lost. We're on the side that will, finally, win.

Again, the message from the Bible's last book: God's Word will be the last Word, and that Word is Love. That is the ultimate message of the scarifying book of Revelation, and that is a cause for great celebration for those of us trying to align our lives with God's Word.

In a few minutes we'll be celebrating Communion, and that's the verb we always use for the central rite of the Christian church: we CELEBRATE Communion. And most of us, if asked what we're celebrating, would say something along the lines of God's love or God's acceptance of us or God's gift of our redemption in Jesus's self-sacrificial life and teachings.

Nothing wrong with any of those answers, but what about our response in faith that brings us to the table – is that not worth celebrating as well? Is that not a perfectly legitimate part of the celebration that we call Communion?

One of the reasons we have changed the format of how we celebrate Communion, so that I now offer to all of you the thin pieces of bread called wafers, is so that I can become part of the celebration over which I formerly only got to preside. After I offered the prayers of remembrance and blessing, I used to stand behind the Communion table and watch as Communion servers offered you the bread and wine. Until the last couple of years, the only time I got to offer the bread of heaven to all of you was at Christmas Eve, and that meant that for most of the church year, I was a bystander at Communion.

But now I get to be part of that party, that joyous celebration of the long game of our redemption that began at creation and will continue until God's new creation. I get to look at each of you as I offer you this sign of God's acceptance of you, and that makes me smile. I'm smiling not simply because I'm participating in this important transaction, but more because YOU'RE participating. You're responding in faith to God's initiative, and although a wafer isn't a cake, it's still a party. Communion is the pre-party, the anticipatory party for that ultimate party depicted in the closing chapters of Revelation, when the new Jerusalem appears from heaven decked out in wedding clothes.

You and I are part of that because we've said yes to God's yes to us. We've accepted our acceptance, to use the phrase of the theologian Paul Tillich, and that should make us glad. We're not lost, we've been found. We're not abandoned, we've been adopted as joint-heirs with Christ of God's realm. We're not confused, we're absolutely certain that Love wins in the end. And because of all of that, we're not going to give up, give over, or give in.

So there they are, four p-words to help us not grow weary in doing what is right: pray, pick, pace, and party. Pray to discern how, specifically, God is calling you. Pick your God-revealed tasks carefully, so you don't waste time, talent, or treasure. Pace yourself so that you don't flame out before you cross the finish line. And party, every now and then, to celebrate your participation in the ongoing work of redemption.

So now let's sing a hymn and get this party started.