

TAKE A DEEP BREATH

Luke 6:12-16

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
1 September 2019

Labor Day Weekend always feels a little sad to me. Summer is my favorite season. I truly enjoy the warm weather, the slightly slower pace of life. Maybe summer reminds me of childhood, of running barefoot in the grass, catching lightning bugs in jars, staying up late. If summer reminds me of childhood, Labor Day makes me want to throw a childish tantrum. I don't want to stop wearing white. I don't want to put away sandals and pull out the boots and the winter clothes.

Fortunately, we live in a place where fall is gorgeous. We ease our way into winter here with long sunny days and beautiful autumn colors.

Many people assume that ministers are busiest during Advent and Lent, but fall is the busiest time of year for me. All of our programs gear up. We are about ready to start our process of looking for leadership for 2020 with our Nominating Team. Our Stewardship Team is preparing for our annual pledge drive. Bible Study begins this week and CrossTraining begins next month. September through December are the busiest four months of the year for me. And I know this is an exceptionally hectic time for many others in our church, including families with school-aged children. I almost entitled this sermon, "Ready, Set, Go." That's how I feel about the start of our program year here at the church, but for some of you, "Ready, Set, Go" happened a couple of weeks ago when school began.

I had a lovely summer, and I'm grateful. I spent time with friends and family, and a lot of time outside, read many good books, took some trips. I feel rested as this busy season begins, and I'm grateful. I've worked especially hard the past six weeks to feel as prepared as possible for the fall program year, and while I still feel like there's a lot on my plate, I feel fairly well organized, and I'm grateful.

But to be perfectly honest with you, I still feel somewhat overwhelmed on this last Sunday of our summer season. I'm not a perfectionist but I want things to go well. I have some challenges to face in the next few months, and I'll bet I'm not the only one worshipping with us today who feels that way. Life can feel overwhelming. Trying to juggle all of the responsibilities of work and family, trying to take care of ourselves, making time for exercise and eating well, nurturing relationships with friends...and most of us who are a part of this community are also concerned with the wider world. Not just with our own homes and families and neighborhoods, but we are well aware of the needs around us, and when we read about poverty and homelessness, about refugees and about gun violence, about fires in the Amazon and hurricanes, about the climate crisis, those issues tug at us...we wonder what we can do to make a difference for good. It can feel overwhelming.

I want to tell you that one of the projects that's taken place behind the scenes at the church this summer is our worship planning for fall. We will launch our first worship series on September 22 and our theme is, "We Choose Hope." Each week we are going to highlight stories of people who are making a difference for good. We will focus on five areas: "Hope for Unity, Hope for Children, Hope for Our Precious Planet, Hope for the Poor, and Hope for the Church." I'm excited about the stories we will be

lifting up in this series. It's important to be realistic, but constantly immersing ourselves in negativity is anything but motivating. When we are given examples of people whose time and talent are making a positive impact, we're encouraged to do the same.

Do you think Jesus ever felt overwhelmed? Frustrated when he taught the disciples something over and over again and they never seemed to comprehend? Irritated when the Pharisees lurked in the corner, watching him closely, just trying to catch him saying or doing something technically against religious law, trying to get him in trouble? Worried about the enemies he was making and what the end result of it all would be? Lonely because he was called to leave his family and friends? I think Jesus, like all human beings, knew what it felt like to be overwhelmed.

Our passage for today lists the names of the twelve apostles. Sometimes in the New Testament, the words "disciple" and "apostle" are used interchangeably. But Luke refers to the disciples as the larger group of Jesus' followers, and from that larger group, Jesus chooses twelve to be apostles...his closest students and followers. Before he chooses them, though, well, here it is in Luke's words: "Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles..." Now during those days, Jesus took to the mountains for prayer...it wasn't a one-time thing; it was a regular habit. Why? To stay in touch with God, to remember who he was called to be and what he was called to do. To listen for God's voice when his days were filled with so many other voices competing for his attention. To receive wisdom so that he could make better decisions, like on this

occasion. Before he chose his twelve apostles, he spent time in prayer. And he also prayed, I believe...because his life was overwhelming.

When life is overwhelming, prayer can help.

Do you feel like you are one of those people who just don't "get" prayer? If so, you're in good company. One of the most famous preachers, speakers and writers in American Christianity today is a woman named Barbara Brown Taylor. She has preached in all the most prominent places and written several best-selling religious books. In one of her most recent, she confesses this: "I am a failure at prayer. I would rather show someone my checkbook stubs than talk about my prayer life." She goes on to elaborate: "I have shelves full of prayer books and books on prayer. I have file drawers full of notes from courses I have taught and taken on prayer. I have meditation benches I have used twice, prayer mantras I have intoned for as long as a week, notebooks with column after column of the names of people in need of prayer (is writing them down enough?) I have a bowed psaltery-a biblical string instrument mentioned in the book of Psalms-that dates from the year I thought I might be able to sing prayers easier than I could say them. I have invested a small fortune in icons, candles, monastic incense, coals, and incense burners." [But still I feel like I'm a failure at prayer.]

In my experience, most people feel like everyone else "gets" prayer; most people feel like other people are better at praying.

I want to encourage you to try to develop a way of praying that works for you. Maybe you don't even want to call it praying - maybe that word is too daunting. So let me put it this way - I want to encourage you to find a way of feeling the presence of

God in your daily life. For primarily two reasons - one, because I believe with all my heart that it will help when you feel overwhelmed - and two, because the awareness of God's presence helps our lives to align with God's values and God's purposes for the world.

There are three words which help me. They are "Focus," "Attention" and "Practice." I'll give you some examples.

My favorite form of exercise is hiking, but I'm not able to hike in the woods on a regular basis; most of the time I have to settle for my second favorite form of exercise, which is walking. Doug and I love to walk through our neighborhood to Walker Road Park where there's a pond and a bit of woods and generally some quiet. If I'm walking on the treadmill at the gym, I always am listening to music or radio or podcasts, but if I'm walking outside, I try not to carry my phone. If I'm walking by myself, I focus on paying attention. I pay attention to what I'm seeing and hearing around me - what animals, what birds, how are the trees? I pay attention to what I'm feeling and thinking and try to observe it all in a neutral, curious way. I ask myself this question, "What is God doing in my life right now?" and I try to focus attention on that question. I don't always have an answer, but the question feels prayerful. The whole walk seems prayerful.

In the 1700's, in a monastery in Paris, there was a monk named Brother Lawrence. His job in the monastery was to wash dishes. Day after day, year after year, he washed dishes in the kitchen of the monastery, and he turned that task into prayer. He decided that instead of complaining to himself about washing dishes - and then praying in the chapel at the designated times - (instead of separating and

segmenting his life) he would turn his whole life into a prayer. He learned to pray while washing dishes, and he wrote a book which has become a spiritual classic, called The Practice of the Presence of God. If he learned to wash dishes prayerfully, what might we be able to do prayerfully?

I suggest driving is a good place to start. For one thing, it will help you become a more calm and patient driver. What it be like to pray for the people in the cars around you as you drive? How would it change you? Any everyday task can be done prayerfully.

Like all communication, prayer is two-way. Prayer is us pouring out our hearts to God, sharing our sorrows, our fears, our joyful gratitude, asking for guidance. Prayer is also listening. Whenever we really listen, we are opening ourselves up to the possibility that we will be changed. If you really listen to someone who is teaching, you are giving your mind permission to receive that teaching and be changed by it. If you really listen to a friend, if you are fully present in the conversation, you are opening your heart to the transformative power of relationships. And when we really listen to God, we are saying to God, “Change me. There are broken parts of my soul that need to be healed; there are mistakes for which I need to be forgiven; I am vulnerable and open to the way you want to work in my life.”

In Hebrew, the word “spirit” and the word “breath” are the same: ruach. When we breathe in, we are inhaling the spirit of God. We have a similar word in English - think about the word “respiration” - the act of breathing - and realize how close it is to the word “inspiration.” Just sitting still and focusing on your breath is a great way to begin to practice prayer.

If you don't have a usual time or form for prayer in your life, I encourage you to try something. Maybe five minutes in the morning or evening, maybe prayer while walking or driving. Focusing your attention on listening for God will help you develop the practice of prayer. I can't guarantee the results, of course, but I have never heard anyone say that they wished they'd spent less time praying.

While we're receiving communion this morning, notice the way that you breathe in and out. Focus on breathing in the life-giving spirit of God. Focus on exhaling out whatever feels tired and worn in yourself. Wonder to yourself, with gratitude and curiosity, how God is working in your life.

Let us pray. Holy God, thank you for giving us a way to draw closer to you, an opportunity to receive your wisdom. We long for the strength and the energy of your Holy Spirit when we are overwhelmed and because we want to be your partners in the healing of the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.