

Not Grow Weary
Based on Isa 40:21-31 and Mark 1:29-39
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Simon Peter's mother-in-law, it seems, is healed, raised from her sick bed, for a reason. So she can give them all dinner. Yes, it's a little troubling, from a feminist perspective, that she seems to literally live to serve. The only way it works is if she's a model for all of Jesus' disciples, including us. That we all are given life, in order to use it for the care of others. Our lives are sustained in order that we might serve the Lord, and love our neighbor.

Sometimes that gets tiring. You gotta wonder if there were days when Peter's mother-in-law wished they had just left her in the sick bed, where at least she didn't have to do the dishes AGAIN.

The prophet Isaiah tells us that God does not ever get tired. God works for good through the natural world, through human intentions both good and bad, leading something beautiful even out of tragedy and cruelty. And God does that all day every day. As the refrain goes, God is good. **All the time.** All the time. **God is good.**

God is not weakened by each act of goodness until he just can't do one more good thing, the way we are when we lift weights or do situps. God never reaches a point where it's just all too much, a point where God says, that is just one tragedy too many, one cruelty, one crime against humanity or exploitation of the natural world too many. I'm done; they're going to have to fend for themselves for a while.

Some of you may be thinking of some biblical story where it seems God does get tired—see me after worship and we'll talk about it. According to the Bible, God can get good and frustrated with humankind, but God does not exactly get tired, certainly not tired enough to give up once and for all.

But we do get that tired. Despite Isaiah's promise, that God will give power to the faint and strength to the powerless, we get weary. Weary of responsibilities that never seem to end, or of commitments that cramp our style.

This morning I looked at the front page of the New York Times on my phone, and there was a montage of photos of people suffering in Gaza. Remember when the

footage of the Vietnam War on the nightly news shocked us? Now I look at these photos and feel as though I've already seen them. I confess, and it is a confession— the photos don't make me sad for the people photographed; the sad thing is that the photos are so terribly familiar, almost routine.

We grow weary of loving our neighbor. Compassion fatigue, they call it. We get tired of worrying about the people of Ukraine and the people of Gaza, the changing climate, or the coming election, or about the people who live in tents in every patch of woods in Cape May county. We get tired of being the responsible one, the older brother in the prodigal son parable, who stays home and does the right thing and doesn't get the party in his honor. We grow weary.

It's fine to need a break, to take a rest, to get away, if only to get some perspective, to listen attentively again to God's call. That's why God rests on the seventh day—to sit back and appreciate, to get perspective. That's what sabbaticals are for, I hear.

We come to church, often, for that rest. We come to receive and recharge, at least some of the time. But there are some kinds of energy and hope and life that you can only receive in the process of a whole lot of giving. Those of you who are visitors or newer members, believe me when I say, the longer you stay, the more deeply you are connected to everyone else in this room, the more you will *get out* of the worship service, or out of any single activity we do together. I know that that deepening reward, that increasing abundance continues for me, continues to surprise and delight me, with each of the six years I have been pastor here.

That's how commitments work—I've found this out only after 6 decades on the planet. We commit thinking we are making a certain kind of sacrifice. And it's only as the weeks and years go by that we realize, the commitment rewards us. Our life gains richness from the commitment in ways we never could have anticipated.

My kids are jealous that the dog likes me best. But we all know that there's a good reason that the dog likes me best. Because I have always fed and walked the dog, and the dog, as my grandmother would say, knows which side his bread's buttered on. And it's not just that end result of the dog's primary loyalty that I receive. It's the moments of seeing him run down the bay beach at full speed, or plunge into the nearest creek, the pleasure of seeing some tiny bald patches in his fur go away when I start adding a teaspoon of olive oil to his food. There's a reason people

have dogs—because there's a pleasure in caring for another living creature. There are pleasures in giving, and they are pleasures that never wear out.

The more I thought about the Brené Brown quote on your bulletins, the more it seems to me to oversimplify things. On the one hand, I hear you, Brené. I too have found it disappointing and irritating when otherwise good people, mostly family members, tell me they can't visit somebody in the hospital because it's too upsetting to them. Well, imagine how upsetting it is for the person in the hospital. It's not a picnic for anyone, but sometimes we just have to get over our precious sensitivities and be there for the people who need our help. It won't upset you nearly so much to be in the hospital if you focus on how you can best help the person who has to stay there.

On the other hand, when we are called to care for loved ones over months and years, or when we are called to minister to people in great need, it's not always possible or even healthy to keep our focus constantly on what the other person is going through. We all need some time to focus on what we ourselves are going through. There has to be some recovery, some balance built in. We can push through helping a neighbor move, even if it's a pain in the neck to give up our Saturday morning. But when we commit ourselves to long term love of our neighbor, it can't be one lifelong pain in the neck. We have to be getting something good out of the work we do. And we absolutely can. If we are mostly focused on the people we serve, we will be building relationships that sustain ourselves as well as the other person.

Every parent and every pet owner knows: it's satisfying to be needed; it's gratifying to be trusted. It's a privilege to be the one that a friend comes to with a scary diagnosis, with the news that a marriage is falling apart or that dementia might be creeping in. It's an honor to be someone who can give a hug of support when it's needed and have it really feel like support. This is where God's promise comes from—that we will rise up with wings like eagles, run and not grow weary, walk and not faint. Because the rest for our souls is in the running; the meaning that lifts us up when we are faint lies in the deep end of the commitment to loving our neighbor.