

Pastor Courtney Steitz

Sermon for June 28, 2020

Several years ago when I was living in Greeley, a group of my friends were sitting around a bonfire. Many of us were busy and lamenting that we did not get to spend as much time together as we had in the past. We were all also runners, to varying degrees, and had all spent time running around a particular park in Greeley. It was exactly one mile around Glenmere Park. A couple of our friends came up with a crazy idea they called the 24 hours of Glenmere. For 24 hours, once each hour we each would run one lap around Glenmere park with a different partner from our friend group. Each person over the course of the day would run 24 miles. I only signed on for this absurd idea because I loved my friend and wanted to spend more time with them. Twenty-four miles felt like a lot, but if I only had to run one mile during the course of each hour, I'd probably be ok? Once we started, I quickly realized that 24-Hours of Glenmere was lot harder than what I thought I had originally signed on for. It was a blazing hot day to begin with, and it turns out that running one mile, every hour for 24 hours, is actually a really difficult task. Relationships deepened and friendship was shared. But by the end of the 24 hours, we were all exhausted, sore, and in desperate need of a shower. What I had thought would be a fun jogging experience with friends, turned out to be grueling physical task.

I wonder if this is a little bit of what the disciples were feeling. The past several weeks we have been reading from the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 10. These Gospel readings share Jesus' instructions to the disciples before sending them out into the world. And I can't help but wonder if the disciples felt a little bit like I did about running 24 miles in 24 hours. When Jesus starts talking about all that they will face, I can't help but wonder if they're worried that they've bitten off a little bit more than they can chew. Remember last week's Gospel reading? Jesus tells his disciples they can expect persecution. Even among family members there will be hurt and division. As Michael pointed out last week, the goal of Jesus' message is not division, but as the disciples follow the way of Jesus, one of justice and grace, they will probably get some flack for it. And it may feel like it's coming at them from all sides!

The verses the precede our passage for today tell us, following Jesus can be hard. The lives of the first disciples are testament to that. And maybe, recently, for you the whole Jesus thing has felt pretty hard too. Covid-19 has made our faith and our church look so different than we remember. If you're like me, you found encouragement in gathering together at the church building each weekend for fellowship, singing, and communion. And even as we begin to think through what all is needed for us to be able to gather together again, we know that things will continue to look very different for quite a while.

During this time of physical distancing we've been learning how to be a community of faith online. We have begun to support each other with handwritten notes, text messages, and phone calls instead of always in person. We have sought to continue to support our broader community by giving generously, by making masks, and by writing notes of encouragement to those in senior living centers. Even as we do Bible study and prayer meetings online, there is a

part of me that knows—this is hard, this is not how it is supposed to be, and I get tired. I want things to go back to the way there were.

And more recently, Pastor Michael and I have been inviting you into conversations about race and injustice. Last week Pastor Michael reminded us that these conversations about race and privilege are important when we follow Jesus. That doesn't mean these conversations are easy, you already know they're not. They're difficult. They can make us feel defensive. It can cause frustration and hurt feelings. Just thinking about engaging these conversations can make our stomach knot up or our shoulders tense. But Jesus doesn't let us off the hook. Part of following Jesus is having hard conversations and facing injustice head on, coming to grips with our role in it, and working to combat it.

All of these things together, on top of the complexity and difficulty of daily life in the pandemic may leave some of you feeling like I did part way through my 24 miles in 24 hours—what have I gotten myself into? What did I sign up for again? Instead of dealing with difficult conversations and complex realities, we'd rather wrap up in a blanket, get a cup of tea, and read a good book.

And I think Jesus gets it. Because after words about persecution and division, we hear these words from our Gospel today. Words about welcome, and hospitality, and service. When we talk about hospitality, we often think about setting out a plate of cookies or tidying up the house before guests arrive. But in Jesus' time, hospitality was an essential part of life. There weren't hotels or gas stations, so you literally couldn't survive without relying on the hospitality of others. This radical form of hospitality meant that when the going got tough for the disciples there would be a community for them to rely on. A community that would offer them shelter, a community that would take them in when they were exhausted, that would offer comfort and a cold glass of water on a hot day.

So siblings in Christ, in the midst of our exhaustion, in the midst of our frustration with the pandemic and our current reality, in the midst of fear and trepidation about entering into conversations about race and justice issues here is God's promise—we don't go alone. In these days, we can welcome one another, we can offer support to each other, and we can encourage one another on the journey, just like the earliest disciples.

There will be days when ministry feels burdensome, and periods in our life when we don't have the energy or the words to pray. And in those moments we will have each other. We can lift one another up in support, we can pray for one another, we can remind one another that we are there. We can welcome each other into our hearts and offer that cool glass of water, knowing that as we extend that kindness it's like we are doing it for Jesus. There are countless ways to live this reality, but one in particular really sticks in my mind. When I was in Seminary I had a professor who said he prayed a different Psalm every day. The Psalms are chock full of emotional prayers to God, often in response to fear and injustice. My professor said that when he came to Psalm that didn't feel relevant for him in that moment, he prayed it for someone else.

There is an African Proverb that says, "If you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together." These are unprecedented times, and I have heard from many of you of the

fatigue that you are experiencing as the pandemic wears on. Some of you have longed for conversations about justice and about race and are aching because of the church's delay in facing such issues. For some of you these conversations are new, but may make you nervous or uncomfortable. And some of you may even excited about the new possibilities this pandemic has opened up. But no matter what you are feeling or experiencing, let us trust in the promise that we do not go alone; let us care for one another as we continue to have difficult conversations about race, as we continue to seek the good of our neighbor in the midst of this pandemic, and as we continue to grow as disciples of Christ.

Amen