

*Words for the Weary*  
A Sermon on Mark 9:30-37 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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One of my favorite passages from the New Testament comes from John 17. At this point in John's telling of the story, Jesus is giving his final words to his disciples before he goes to Gethsemane, where he will be arrested. At the end Jesus prays that his disciples would develop close, healthy, supportive relationships, modeled on Jesus' relationship with the one he calls 'Father'. Jesus prays "that they may all be one."

Jesus wants his disciples to be in supportive, healthy relationships with one another. This idea is different than what we find in much of the rest of life, but it is at the center of our fellowship at St. Paul's Church. We are striving to create healthy, caring relationships with one another. We are striving to act in ways that increase the trust between us. We are striving to succeed in our work together through the mutual respect and integrity of our relationships.

To use an image from everyday life, we are all members of the same team. The contributions of every member of the team bring us closer to fulfilling our mission. I ask us to take a few minutes today to consider some of the opportunities and challenges we face as a team of Jesus' disciples in our particular time and place.

The first thing I observe about our current situation is that many of us are feeling a little extra tired right now. Some of us are feeling a bit more anxious or afraid than usual. There are several reasons for the extra anxiety or fear, and this unusual sense of exhaustion felt by some of us.

One reason is visible all around us. We are in the middle of the largest construction project at St. Paul's in many decades. Extravagant amounts of dust are finding their way into the nave, into the Brewster Room, into the choir room, into the church offices, and into our Sunday School room. Extra supplies and furniture have been brought into the few remaining spaces that are not under construction.

It's kind of like being on a months-long camping trip with one hundred of your closest friends. For the first few months some of the temporary arrangements were tolerable. 12 months ago, some the changes brought by the construction were even a little bit fun, like having the coffee brewing just a few feet from the pulpit. But the novelty of walking an extra five minutes through the building to find a bathroom that is still functional has worn off. If we think of our construction project like a camping trip, we are in the part of the trip where we just want to get home, put on clean clothes, and sleep on real mattresses once again.

We come to this place to try to settle ourselves down, and listen to God's still, small voice speaking to us through the chaos of life. We are ready for the chaos and the extra layers of dust to be gone. Most of us are a little extra tired from the extra efforts required to complete the reconstruction of our building.

There is a second, more troubling reason for the extra level of exhaustion we feel. As followers of Christ, the values and practices articulated by Jesus and by St. Paul are vitally important to you and to me. You might say we believe in these values and practices. We believe that each person is created in the image of God. We believe that each person deserves equal respect and freedom. We practice non-violence. Following Jesus' instructions, we try to not judge other people, or pretend that they are fundamentally lesser than us because they are immigrants, or speak a different language, or have a different culture. We believe it is our responsibility to care for the poor and show respect for them, the way Jesus did. We believe in the practices of harmony given to us by St. Paul and by Jesus.

For the past nine years you and I have come face to face with a barrage of some of the most hateful, unChristian words ever broadcast on television or printed in newspapers in America. We might not always know what is in the hearts and minds of those who speak these words, but we know their words directly contradict the values and practices given to us by Jesus and by St. Paul.

You and I have managed to survive and continue to function in relatively healthy ways in spite of this barrage of divisive, hateful messages broadcast on the evening news and repeated in countless news stories. It hasn't been easy. For those of us seeking to love our neighbors as Jesus taught us, each time we watch another video of someone seeking to divide us or make us angry, we use a chunk of the energy and creativity given to us by God. Each time we read another set of racist lies, we use some of our energy in order to respond as people who love, rather than people who hate.

If you have felt the reserves of goodwill and kindness becoming depleted in your heart, there is an obvious reason. Your reserves of goodwill and kindness are being depleted. You have been drawing on those reserves for the past nine years to respond with love in a time of increasing division and violence. For our team, which is the entire congregation of members of St. Paul's, there are clear reasons for us to feel a little extra tired or a little extra anxious or afraid at this time in our life together.

So I have three ideas for us as we strive to grow more fully into the blessed community described in the New Testament. First, I encourage you to place a priority on taking care of yourself. Each one of us has different levels of tolerance for violent or hateful words and images. Limit your exposure to hurtful words and ideas. Last Sunday a member shared a suggestion with me; spend more time in prayer than you spend consuming the news. You could also give yourself the goal of spending more time appreciating God's creation or talking with your neighbors or friends than you spend consuming the news. Take measures to protect and nurture the love God has placed in the center of your life.

My second idea comes from our Gospel passage for today. Jesus overhears the disciples arguing with one another about who among them was the greatest. Then Jesus sat down among them and said, *"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."* Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, *"Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."* Jesus' point is that we have to let go of our pride if our goal is to love one another. This message is even clearer in Matthew's version of this story: *Jesus called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*

Little children are not concerned about whether they are the greatest. Little children are curious about the world. Little children do not have detailed agendas for what they will accomplish in the next year.

In the situation we are in, feeling a bit more exhausted than usual, a bit more anxious or afraid, my second suggestion is that we consider the example of the little children. We will be stronger if we let go of some of our pride and defensiveness. We will be more loving if we are slower to judge and more curious about the ideas and situations of others.

My third idea for our particular team comes from some people who know an awful lot about teamwork: the women of the WNBA. Like some other people, I started watching women's basketball last March during the NCAA playoffs. Basketball has always been my favorite of the team sports. I've attended many basketball games in my life, including several home games for my favorite team: the Boston Celtics.

Yet I was surprised by what I saw when I began watching women's basketball. In the NBA much of the focus is on great individual players. In the WNBA they play the game with nearly identical rules, but the focus is completely different. Women's basketball is a team sport in a way

that is different from men's basketball. The winning teams are always the teams that are passing the ball to each other and setting up plays for each other.

In one game I was watching last week, one of the star players was driving toward the basket with the ball. I was sure she was going to go for the layup, but instead she passed the ball across the court to her teammate who was standing just behind the three-point line. That woman could have also taken her shot but instead passed the ball to a third player, who was completely unguarded and standing 20 feet away. The third player had plenty of time to shoot and she scored three points. Her team took the lead, and they ended up winning the game.

The teamwork of these players goes well beyond the way they pass the ball and create opportunities for others to score. When one woman goes to the free throw line it seems like every member of her team makes contact with her, patting her on the shoulder or giving her a hug. These women know they will never succeed if they don't work together as a team, so that's what they do. It's a joyful thing to watch.

In previous times this third idea, the idea of teamwork, has been almost easy for us. It's part of our culture at St. Paul's to work together as a team. But when we are feeling a little extra tired or a little extra anxious, we might forget to do those little things that help us work together joyfully and productively. Especially now, it's time for us to redouble our connection to the source of hope, joy and strength: the life and love given to us by Christ Jesus.

There are many beautiful, powerful parts of St. Paul's Church. The trust and mutual support of our members for one another are the glue that holds everything together. But they are much more than glue. The trust and caring among us are the joy and vitality God intends to be in the center of our lives, and a reflection of God's love for us.