

I'm Overwhelmed

Mark 14:32-36

November 14, 2021

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

David Lewicki, preaching

³²They went to a place called Gethsemane; and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." ³³He took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be distressed and agitated. ³⁴And he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and keep awake." ³⁵And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. ³⁶He said, "Abba,^[b] Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."

It's a little strange, in November, to hear a story that we normally reserve for Maundy Thursday: Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. But the title of today's sermon is "*I'm overwhelmed*." And I thought we should read this, at the very least to be reminded that Jesus—who was God in the flesh—was not spared from being overwhelmed. Did you hear what he felt? Distress? Agitation? Grief? Praying for a way out? I know that *all of you* can identify with at least some of what Jesus felt... sleepless, afraid, at your wit's end. Jesus was overwhelmed, and we know a bit about what that feels like.

In case you're wondering whether the "I" in the title of today's sermon refers to Jesus, or me, or you, the answer is "yes." It happens to all of us. Some of the days this past year were as hard for me as being young dad with a child in the hospital. This past year, like some of you, it was hard for me to be a good parent, to be a loving partner, and to do my job. I couldn't see all the good things that still surrounded me. The old fisherman's prayer says, "O Lord, the sea is so wide, and my boat is so small." I felt overwhelmed. The irony is that so many of us have felt so alone at the very same time.

You probably don't *need* data about our collective mental health to know that we are living through a hard time. But it can be good to know for a fact you're not alone, so here's the data:

- at any given time now, 2 in 5 adults are experiencing significant mental health issues
- 3 in 5 young adults are experiencing mental health challenges
- 1 in 5 of us is having more trouble sleeping,
 - More trouble concentrating,
 - fighting more with a spouse,
 - drinking more alcohol
- Mental health is worse when we experience job loss, financial distress, and physical illness
- 1 in 2 adults report our kids are having mental health struggles; 1 in 5 report those problems as serious

It's all serious. Mental health is health. When we are not mentally well, we are not well.

Christianity has millenia of collective wisdom about the ups and downs of our human condition. Our tradition knows this experience of being overwhelmed by life. It's not new. If you've ever felt overwhelmed and read the Psalms, you felt like someone was reading your journal:

Psalm 55

⁴ My heart is in anguish within me,
...⁵ Fear and trembling come upon me,
and overwhelm me.
⁶ And I say, "O that I had wings like a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest;
⁷ truly, I would flee far away;

Psalm 102

For my days pass away like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace.
⁴ My heart is stricken and withered like grass;
I am too wasted to eat my bread.
⁵ Because of my loud groaning
my bones cling to my skin.
⁶ I am like an owl of the wilderness,
like a little owl of the waste places.
⁷ I lie awake;
I am like a lonely bird on the housetop.

Our tradition knows this experience of being overwhelmed by life. It also knows ways through to strength and peace of mind:

Psalm 18: In the day of my calamity;
... the Lord was my support.
¹⁹ God brought me out into a broad place;
God delivered me, because God delighted in me.

Before we talk about that "broad place," let's talk about what is it to be overwhelmed. What causes it? What helps us when we're in it to find our way through?

The first thing I need to say is that if you feel overwhelmed, there's nothing wrong with you. You are not weak. Life is hard. It's always been hard. This year has been extra hard. Working a full-time job while also being your child's teacher while managing social isolation and anxiety and stress—that is hard. It didn't help that for much of that time we watched a pathological narcissist destroying democracy from inside the White House, we watched earth burn, and we watched our 400 year old affliction of white supremacy rise up again.

Beyond the pandemic and politics, there are big structural things that make many of us feel overwhelmed. One criticism of capitalism is that it de-humanizes us—it consistently puts profits over people. Many of us have to fight for what should be guaranteed: a living wage, healthcare, time off. It is particularly hard to navigate this world as a woman. For decades, women have worked two jobs—one outside the home and one inside. Women make less, have a harder time advancing, and the decision to have a child can still derail a woman's career in a country that refuses to make parental leave mandatory and refuses to provide universal childcare.

Objectively, capitalism is designed to make us feel overwhelmed. One solution is political organizing and workplace organizing so that our society values us as human beings regardless of what we contribute to an employer.

Now, I know when I was feeling overwhelmed this past winter, the last thing I was in the mood for was political advocacy—so we give that task to those of us who are feeling empowered. Those of us who are feeling overwhelmed just need to figure out how to keep in the air all the plates that we're spinning without having them crash down, and manage the things we're holding without collapsing under their weight.

One thing you might do, if you feel like there are too many plates spinning, or you're just holding too much, is to stop. Let a few plates fall. Let things drop. I don't say this lightly. It's hard. But we forget sometimes that we have agency over our lives. We are free beings. I'm sure you're aware that many, many people decided to make huge changes in our lives during the pandemic. Lots of us left jobs. Some of us moved to new places or moved family members closer to us. Some of us ended relationships. All of those changes are huge. None of those changes makes everything better. When a plate crashes to the floor, it's messy. But the feeling of being overwhelmed often involves a loss of agency—you forget that you are still responsible for your life and its direction. You can make changes—even big ones; and sometimes change is what you need to find a life that is nourishing, not overwhelming.

Change doesn't have to be big to be meaningful. Sometimes, the change we need to feel ourselves again is small—or at least less visible. A shift of your priorities, shift in the way you organize your life, a shift in how you spend your time—which is how you spend your life.

We are allowed to take care of our own needs. We have to. These days we call this “practicing self-care.” There's no better advice than “get 8 hours sleep, eat good food, and move enough every day to sweat.” Beyond that, practicing self-care can simply mean taking time to do things that you enjoy:

- Read
- Walk or hike
- Travel to see new things, even of those things are within a few miles of home
- Make time to cook good food and eat it
- Do a puzzle, play an instrument, knit, write, sing, play, do something that that immerses your being

Anything, so long as it's not sitting alone on a device, doom scrolling, is self-care. Wendell Berry, the poet, advises, “every day do something that won't compute.” I'm a particular advocate for beauty. Beauty doesn't need anything from you, except that you appreciate it.

This gets us closer to a sense of what self-care really is: it's letting yourself be pulled out of the urgency, the crisis, away from the myriad voices that are telling you what they need from you. Self-care is letting yourself be drawn into a rhythm of life that is slow, and quiet, and possibly

even eternal. Self-care is letting all of the other voices and scripts telling what to do and who you are supposed to be go away until there is only one voice—the voice within you.

We read a poem from Steve Garnaas-Holmes—to me, it describes “self care.” Lose the book about who you are, lose the script that tells you what to say, lose the map, lose the radio signal... it’s an invitation to go off the grid—but you know you can go off the grid without ever leaving home, right? It’s called stillness, solitude. “Look up and discover this place, green and thriving, spreading out from you into the world.” It’s such a lovely invitation to simply be where you are—to observe the beauty that is everyday all around you. Listen to the voice within “that already knows who you are.”

Taking time, appreciating beauty, slowing down, listening. It’s all a way of talking about prayer, right?

There’s one more thing that you can do when life seems too much for you to bear alone. That is, do not bear it alone. Reach out and tell someone. Share it with someone. Then share it with someone else. And share it again. Because even though it feels like it, you are not alone. You are never alone. That is not how God made you. God made you and made us so that each of us belongs to one another. We are always here for each other.

In a wonderful essay I read this week, the writer Ijeoma Oluo suggests that we might be better off if we replaced the idea of “self-care” with “community care.” Self-care just feeds the illusion that we are isolated, autonomous beings, and the only one who will ever look out for us is us. It’s not true. Oluo writes about all the ways that she has received care from others, but she is just as grateful for the chance to reciprocate—to let others lean on her—sharing money, exchanging encouraging phone calls and texts, meal trains when we’re sick. She writes:

“Community care creates the environment in which we all can thrive. Community care reminds me time and time again that I’m never alone, and always have reason for hope.”

My boat is so small, the sea is so wide, but there’s a whole fleet of other boats out here and we are headed toward a harbor and that harbor is big enough to shelter all of us.

This experience of being overwhelmed, which is at least as old as the Psalms, and was familiar to Jesus, is not going away. Please remember, no matter how overwhelmed you feel, you are never without agency—you can always make changes. You can resist systems that dehumanize us and transform them. You can throw away the scripts and the maps that have led you astray and you can take time in quiet to listen to that divine voice that calls you by name and guides your feet from within. You always belong in a community of care that will bear your burdens when you are weak and lets you be there for others when you are strong.

It’s funny. We’ve heard a lot about this experience of being overwhelmed during the pandemic. And I’m sure we’re all looking forward to a time when the basics of life aren’t so overwhelming. But I do want to say that there are at least two ways that “overwhelmed” gets used in

Scripture. One is the way we've been talking about it—the overwhelmed that feels like we are alone and powerless.

The second kind of overwhelmed was experienced by people who stood there and heard Jesus read from Isaiah and proclaim there is good news for the poor and release to the captives and the time for that good news is now. That second kind of overwhelmed was experienced by people who heard Jesus speak the Beatitudes and preach the sermon on the mount. This second kind of overwhelmed was the feeling of the disciples who huddled afraid in a boat as they watched Jesus still a storm with a word. Overwhelmed was the experience of 3 women in Mark's gospel who came to a tomb on Easter morning and found it empty. Friends, there is a wideness in God's mercy, there is a kindness in God's justice, there's an incomparable joy when you feel yourself gathered in by a love that is more powerful than anything else in all creation, when you know that love has you and hold you. The only word to describe that feeling is overwhelmed. May we be so overwhelmed.