

Jeff's Jottings
July 17, 2020

So How Are You?

Jeff is in Michigan this week and next, combining some vacation with unexpected acute family care. Jottings this week is from his friend Tim Ten Clay, a congregational minister outside of New York City. His reflections, though personal (and somewhat lengthy), speak for so many during these challenging times, and are important for all of us to hear. Please, in this time, care for your pastors and other church leadership.

A few of my friends have asked. I offer this in response to their requests:

"Fine."

"It's been wearing."

"Exhausted. Worn out. Done."

Those are my answers.

When someone asks me how I'm doing, I almost always respond "fine." It's honest, but it's not particularly telling. To be fair, most people aren't actually asking; they're just being polite.

There are those who push just a little further, with whom I am a bit more precise, "It's been wearing." They are being kind – trying to be empathetic, but I'm not convinced they REALLY want to know.

A tiny percentage of people are both persistent enough AND seem authentic enough to truly want to hear what pastoring during these past few months has been like. If they push hard enough, I'll tell them: I'm exhausted. Worn out. Done.

"Really?!" they often respond, "Why?!"

At this point, I back-pedal a bit. I have a job; I have a roof over my head; I have lost loved ones to Covid but my immediate family has remained healthy; we are not hungry; the members of my congregation have mostly stayed safe; I am not hounded by factions who are pushing against our decision to hold off until September for in-person worship. I have a lot to be thankful for.

These months, however, have also been unprecedented. I've sometimes described the whole experience as if I were a computer with too many windows open at once – I may not be paying direct attention to most of them at any given time, but they're running in the background taking up resources.

My children are too young to be left entirely to their own devices, but they have not been to school since March and all of their summer plans have been cancelled. My wife and I are both working full-time (predominantly) from home. I now handle most of the liturgy, all of the preaching, and most of the music – recording them, editing them, posting them, and emailing links every week. Instead of coffee time and potlucks, we're relegated to Zoom conferences. Instead of visits, I'm driving to people's houses and talking with them through windows and doors, sending old-fashioned letters, and making phone calls. Instead of Bible studies, I'm sending out mid-week devotionals.

They're all good things – but they require immense and very different types of energy than the way it was done “before.” They also required a steep learning curve (which has flattened a bit but not gone away). Of course, as a solo pastor, I have no audio visual department or staff to edit videos and oversee our online presence. This is all exacerbated by the fact that whatever worked “well” pre-Covid is “barely working” now, and whatever “barely worked” before March is officially in the “dysfunctional” category now.

This may surprise some people, but a 10-minute sermon takes longer to prepare than a 20-minute one, and a devotional that can be read in 5 minutes often takes an hour or two to write – even longer with children, spouse, house, and everything else going on in the background. To be clear, I deeply love my family, but being in the same space with them and “on call” for them 24-hours a day for 4 months has been a bit much (and there is no clear end in sight). (Incidentally, they would say the same thing about me!)

Sure, I tend to overwork (this is a long-standing personal failure), but after years of struggling to take “a day off” and put my work responsibilities “in their place” (and finally, slowly, gaining some ground on that front), I am struggling to get everything done even though I work 7-days a week and late into most evenings... afraid (probably unnecessarily) of losing my job and disappointing my congregation and loved ones – afraid of requiring even more resilience from my children, when too much has already been demanded of them. (By the way, please don't suggest I just “take a vacation.” While I've officially schedule sometime off, current realities do not allow actual time away, and I feel like I'm wasting my few, precious vacation weeks by doing so.)

On top of that, every decision is a MAJOR decision – even the least significant things, like picking up a pint of ice cream at the grocery store or dropping a loaf of bread at someone's house, are now decisions that potentially put my family and my congregation at risk of a disease for which nearly all of them are considered “high risk.”

I will also admit (perhaps a bit selfishly), that I am tinged with a bit of jealousy for those who have found this time “relaxing,” “rejuvenating,” and an “opportunity to try new things and focus on themselves.” I don't recall the last time I truly felt “relaxed,” “rejuvenated,” and able to “try new things and focus on myself.” I am definitively not a morning person, yet for the first time in my life, despite my exhaustion, I set an alarm to make sure I get up earlier than everyone else in the house in order to have a few minutes alone with my little cup of coffee. (For some, that is a long-standing and life-giving discipline, for me it is a stop-gap to keep my head above water.)

To frost this whole complicated little cake, almost none of the “self-care” disciplines I started the year out with (and doing well with!) have been possible since March and all of the plans I had FINALLY made – after years of over-working, lack of institutional support, and under-self-caring – (including a long-awaited, and much-anticipated pilgrimage) have been cancelled.

None of this, of course, comes up in 99 out of a hundred conversations. I refuse to sound like I'm “complaining” when I have friends whose small businesses may not make it through the next 3 months and when people around me are struggling with health repercussions that may last for the rest of their lives (which may also be cut shorter than expected).

So why write it now?

Because, some of my friends and colleagues cannot. They can't tell you what it's like. They don't have the freedom to be honest. I don't mean to suggest that all ministers are experiencing this in the same way (we are not!) and you can ask them how it's going (indeed, I encourage you to do so!), but their response may be nothing more than "fine." Don't take it personally; it isn't (necessarily) that they don't like you. They just may not have the energy to say anything more.

On the other hand, if you DO ask, make sure you're prepared for them to answer and prepared to do something about it if they tell you they need help.