

“Holding Sand”
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When I was in college for the second time, I took an intro into psychology class. It was the kind of class that all the freshmen took and I had already finished two years of college and had worked full time for a year prior. One of the first presentations of the class, the professor pulled up this graph and said; “The human body peaks at the age of 21. After that point, it is a long, slow decline. So you all haven’t even hit your peak yet!” This boosted the confidence of every other student in that course, because they were all 18 years old. Meanwhile, I’m over here, already past the age of 21 thinking; “So, it’s all downhill from here!”

So you mean to tell me that I have already hit my peak? Really? I was last place on my high school golf team. My knees lock up when I step wrong. I’m not even in a career yet, I got some *serious* bags under my eyes. I can’t run a mile without passing out, and you mean to tell me that I have *already* hit my peak, and I am *already* declining. You mean to tell me, that this body that I am in, may never get better than it already has been? I didn’t believe it! I’m not trying to you know, like we have a hulk or anything. I thought there was no way I haven’t hit my physical peak!

It’s been a few years since then. I can confirm, they were right. The science checks out. I just spent the last week sleeping on a couch upstairs in this church with anywhere from 10 to 20 middle and high schoolers. This was after we had done things like pulled weeds and harvested veggies from farms, picked up trash while dredging through creeks, walking around downtown in the 3pm heat, and running around the halls of the 3rd floor chasing each other around in an assortment of games. Not only that, I was also in a wedding yesterday, and I’m here trying to give a sermon in the middle of all of that and my whole body feels like a potato.

Y’all, I am tired. I am exhausted. But for some reason, the work we have done this week has made me feel more alive than ever before at the same time.

I think Paul felt a similar way when he was doing his ministry. In this passage we read this morning from the Corinthian Letters, Paul is in the middle of this long exposition about what it looks like for him and his cohort to be doing the work he felt God had called them to do. That was to spread the experience of new life through Christ's death and resurrection to the world, and to form new communities based on this shared experience of abundant life in Christ.

The Corinthian letters are extremely interesting to read. They contain some of Paul's most classic writings. But, we often read them through a magnifying glass and never within the context of the conversations that are actively being had in the scriptures. I always tell people that the best way to read the Bible is in large chunks so that you can see the bigger picture of a selection of text. That is very important for 2 Corinthians.

Paul's letters are parts of conversations between Paul and the new faith communities he was connected to. For Corinthians we have only pieces of a greater conversation. Paul catches wind of things that are going on in the church in Corinth, Greece, and so he writes them a letter in response. That letter is 1 Corinthians. Basically, the Corinthian Church is trying to figure out what it really looks like to *be* this new community of faith in Jesus. They are learning how to care for one another, how to live in the midst of diversity of economic and class status and how to share the abundant life of Christ together. What we find is that some in the Corinthian church are way too into the pleasantries of life and less into the sacrifices that it takes to live in community with one another.

This conversation goes back and forth for some time. We know that Paul writes a letter, and they respond to Paul. Then, Paul responds again. Paul's response, to their initial response is what we call 2 Corinthians. What we know from reading the letter as a whole, in the context of conversation, is that there is conflict going on between Paul and the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians Paul tries to correct the community's ways of doing things. Some time passes and we do not have the correspondence that takes place between the two letters we have. But somewhere in between the 1st letter and the 2nd, the Corinthians have upset Paul, possibly by challenging his authenticity. So, in 2nd Corinthians, we get a Paul that is not only trying to mend his reputation

but also is trying to mend his relationship with the Corinthian church, while also still trying to provide guidance to them.

In the letter, Paul uses his physical body, and the bodies of those who minister with him as a central image for what it means for someone to do the work that God has called them to do. In chapter 4, just before our passage, he writes; “we have this treasure in clay jars” Here he is speaking of the power of the Gospel, the death and resurrection of Christ. Paul tells the church, “You know the afflictions we have endured, yet with those afflictions, we still experience and share the abundant life of Christ.” Paul recognizes the frail nature of the human body, and that God chose to put this treasure, the liberating and life-giving power of the Gospel inside of these frail vessels.

Paul is telling them, look at us! Look at me! I am *exhausted*. Yet I am more alive than I have ever been. And that life is the treasure of God within this frail and exhausted body. Remember when I said that Corinth was in Greece? It's important, because Paul is a master of taking basic concepts of Greek philosophy, which is often Dualistic, (meaning that there is a clear distinction between good and bad; like body and spirit) and then introducing some classic Jewish non-dual thought and stirring their dualities together.

So Paul tries to show them that you cannot hold the abundant life that Christ offers without simultaneously holding the death of Christ as well. But if that is true, it means that when you suffer affliction, Christ suffers affliction alongside you, and if you hold the affliction of Christ within you, you also hold with you the resurrection life of Christ.

You cannot hold one without the other. If you try to only hold the life of Christ, while running away from afflictions you aren't holding it right, and thus are not holding the Gospel at all.

Paul is telling the Corinthians: “look, if you want to be this new kind of community, offering an abundant life in Christ, *for everyone*, then you're going to have to let go of this incessant need to only experience things that are pleasant for you.” He is trying to warn them not to fall into the traps of a Gospel that doesn't take into account the sufferings of the world, and to shy away from a message that doesn't call them into the mess of life that is being community with those who are suffering.

He tells them in our passage: Look at us! We have been broken, beaten, imprisoned, overlooked and trampled on. We are *exhausted*. Yet — we are

alive, and our hearts are open wide and if you wish to truly share this new life through Christ, then you also must open your hearts wide.

Experiencing abundant life in Christ, both in our own journey and in our community, is like holding sand. Now, when you need to hold onto something, how do you do that? Obviously you grab a hold of it and you squeeze it! But, if you try to hold sand like that, the harder you squeeze it, the faster it slips through your hands. What you have to do is counterintuitive. You have to open your hands wide, dig into the ground and hold it gently, letting it rest within your hands.

When we open ourselves up, we can hold much more than when we decide to squeeze and latch on to the things that we believe we need to be holding onto.

This week the youth participated in a local mission week. Honestly it was every kind of youth trip all squeezed into one. A four-night-long lock-in with retreat-like games and conversations sprinkled into workdays and walks around our downtown neighborhoods. Jackson Underwood even wrote an entire worship service for us.

But one of the most jarring experiences was this: usually on a mission trip, you go somewhere, you help someone fulfill a need that is essential for them and then you go home. But there's no coming home from this. We're already home. The issues of poverty, homelessness, hunger and the systems that keep those issues in place are swirling right here around our block as we speak and if we are not exhausted by that, I am not sure we are holding all of the Gospel.

But one of the most encouraging experiences was this: usually on a mission trip you go somewhere, you help someone fulfill a need that is essential for them, and then you go home. But there's no coming home from this. We're already home. You can't just say "see ya later, possibly never!"

This week we met people and organizations just blocks away that are not just trying to meet particular needs in our communities but are actively being a part of our neighborhoods and are actively attempting to impact the systems in place that cause the issues of poverty, homelessness, hunger, and even the environmental impact they have right here.

Now there is no way the people whom we met this week, who are in the dust and grime of fighting the good fight are not *exhausted*. But what was

obvious was the life that they had and the hope they had, and their love for the community that they had created, and had become a part of. Too often we people of faith try to dig our hands into the sand and pull out a need that we think we can meet for the community without actually being *in* the community. We cannot offer solutions to communities that we are not in community with. The same goes for the individuals around us every day. If we are not willing to be with people in one another's mess, we cannot expect to participate in the abundant life of our communities or our individual relationships. We have to open our hearts wide to being in community with one another.

There is nothing more frustrating than someone offering a "tight fisted" solution to a complex situation. There's no quick fix for systemic issues in our community. There's no easy way to recover from trauma. There's no seamless transition back out of the pandemic. There's no instant medicine for grief. There's no instant pick me up from the exhaustion of everyday life.

But there is a counterintuitive way of experiencing abundant life. One that doesn't need us to squeeze and insert ourselves quickly and then move along. But one which God calls us. Good calls us to stop, to sit, and to hold the sand with those around us. It is the very death of, and the resurrection of Christ that lives within us that allows us to experience life though our bodies feel exhausted day to day by the world. It is the powerful calling of Christ to *be* community together within these walls, and within our city, by — like our hands trying to hold sand — opening our hearts wide.

Amen.