

Preaching in Iowa, 2024

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"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." This is the gracious invitation of Jesus in Matthew 11, the gospel reading for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A. I am currently serving as the transitional pastor for a congregation of fifty-plus faithful folks who are carrying heavy burdens as they work to keep their ministry vital with few members and the age of the membership against them.

This assignment sent me to my ancient filing system, which referred me to *The Gift of Peace: Personal Reflections* by Joseph Cardinal Bernadin. He was, in his words, "dying publicly" after a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer back in the mid-1990s.

On August 31st, 1996, the day after I announced that the cancer had spread to my liver and was inoperable, I presided at a communal anointing of the sick at Saint Barbara Church in Brookfield, Illinois. I told my fellow sick that, when we are faced with serious illness (or any serious difficulty), we should do several things—things that have given me peace of mind personally.

The first is to put ourselves completely in the hands of the Lord. We must believe that the Lord loves us, embraces us, never abandons us (especially in our most difficult moments). This is what gives us hope in the midst of life's suffering and chaos. It is the same Lord who invites us, "Come to me" (123-4).

Cardinal Bernardin's paraphrase of Matthew 11:28 is, "Come to me all you who are weary and find life burdensome." I found his re-articulation of the Good News refreshing and applicable for my fifty burden-carriers.

When I think of preaching in rural Iowa, the rural Midwest, my thoughts go immediately to context and those who are "weary and carrying heavy burdens." A brief bio may be helpful. I was raised on a small farm in Iowa. My great grandparents purchased the land in 1919 for my grandparents to farm. My parents took over in 1952 when it became physically too much for my grandfather. It became a "Century Farm," recognized by the state in 2019. When my siblings wanted to sell, I could not let it go, and my spouse and I took on more debt in our late 50s than most thinking people do. We are still active in the farming operation with the help of my cousin. I believe it was the poet and environmentalist Wendell Berry who said, "I know best who I am when I am close to the land." My ministry has mainly been in rural Iowa and Minnesota, the last thirteen years before retirement in a Presbytery position which placed me in many rural churches. I ache for our rural communities.

Like most stoic Midwesterners, the residents say, this is the life, we have our roots, we have our faith, we know who we are, we know our neighbors, and have a

depth of connection most Americans will not replicate. It is our privilege to be close to the land and see the sun rise and set. They readily claim the title "real Americans," a label Sarah Palin gave rural folk in the 2008 campaign, intending to divide. George Packer, in his book *Last Best Hope: America in Crisis and Renewal* defines the "real Americans" as the ones who grow our food and fight our wars.

But they are weary. Weary from all the loss. The loss of neighbors, as the smaller farmers retire or sell out to the larger farmers and more corporative entities. The loss of the grocery store and the hardware store. The loss of children in the classroom and the pew, the closing of the school, cuts to the heart of a community. The abundant churches have to learn how to share pastors or merge, the loss of a precious sanctuary is always painful. The loss of emergency services and medical clinics could be added to the list.

The purpose of this article is not to restate the decline of rural America. I refer to the book *The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Small-Town America* by the sociologist Robert Wuthnow for further reading. I point to all the loss ... loss ... loss.

When I was in high school fifty years ago, small communities were vital. Our parents urged us, the baby boomers, on to college, and many of my generation became the first in our families with college degrees. We moved on. The brain drain is palpable. The lack of support for education, especially public education and universities, in my state makes it hard to stay, especially for someone in the Reformed tradition which holds the development of the mind is a part of our service to God.

We are all weary, grieving the loss of civility and the growing division. Wuthnow writes of the "group think" of small towns which makes it difficult, if not impossible, for minority voices. If I could have another ten-year run, in this time of great divide, I would challenge my congregation, whether rural or urban, to walk into the chasm. Imagine a rural congregation partnering with an urban or suburban congregation, committing to meaningful dialogue and participation in the ministry of the other church for an extended period of time. Are we open and willing to partner with the Spirit to heal this great divide? I suppose this is a digression for this article in a preaching journal, but the need is massive.

And the rural communities are heavily burdened. The retired folks are carrying much of the load of keeping a community and the churches going, add extended family responsibilities to the beleaguered seniors.

Consider who is preaching in the rural communities these days. Several years ago I sold an old pickup truck on Craigslist. The man who bought it is a preacher in his very small community. He is a recovering addict, with a high school education, and when the Roman Catholics abandoned the community and sold their building he bought it and started a church. It is the only church in town. Most of the mainline denominations have developed training so the more serious laity can preach and offer leadership in their churches. Many of those trained lay preachers have not lived outside of their counties. Education and worldview are limited, they are prone to support

the Christian nationalism movement, with the flag front and center in the sanctuary. Seminary-trained preachers feel isolated and are often out of their element culturally, leading to short-term calls which frustrates even the most faithful members, who say, "I will not serve on another pastor nominating committee." After the pandemic and the exodus of many pastors, finding a new pastor is nearly impossible. Holding them in a small, rural church is way outside of the norm.

What will help preaching in rural Iowa in Lent 2024? I humbly offer a suggestion for rural preachers as well as those in urban or suburban contexts. There is power in pastors meeting together regularly for support and education. I personally give testimony to this truth. When I was in my first preaching call I sought guidance from seasoned pastors who were unwilling to commit to a structured schedule. I floundered navigating the shoals of ministry and preaching.

The next call, in a community of twenty-five thousand a door opened. I was invited to participate in an ecumenical support group which met weekly for an hour. When I moved from that call to the presbytery position seventeen years later, I readily affirmed that it was my colleagues who saved me and enabled me to live my calling. I would have been sidelined by the challenges of ministry without their support, direction, and encouragement. The friendship combatted the loneliness of ministry, and our unity was a witness to the community.

On September 11, 2001, we trusted each other and had an immediate connection to organize a response for our community. The relationships fostered a partnership as we brought our congregations along to address the needs and injustices in our community. When we realized five of our churches were celebrating our Sesquicentennials in the same year, we planned a combined worship service, during the week of Christian unity, progressing from one sanctuary to the next. The following day, the local newspaper headline read, "Hundreds gather for ecumenical service." It was as if the community knew this was the way it should be. The Christians lingered over the coffee in the time of fellowship which followed. A Roman Catholic nun, full of gratitude, shook my hand as she was leaving and said, "The Spirit just kept getting sweeter."

This could all be traced back to 11 a.m. on Tuesday morning where six or seven colleagues gathered for support, friendship, and prayer. I understand it is a different time but our efforts in ecumenism have never been more crucial and relationship depth will not happen without time and commitment.

Our time together could have been more beneficial. We needed a trained facilitator from outside of the group. The loudest, neediest pastor in the group monopolized the conversation, forcing the rest of us to squeeze in around the edges. Devoting time for intentional learning would have also added depth to my ministry.

When I was in the denominational position, I stumbled into the pastor cohort model of Macedonian Ministries, now called The Ministry Collaborative. We asked each pastor to give four hours a month, meeting with the same pastors and lay pas-

tors. Time was given to worship, content, support, and fellowship over a nice meal. The seminary-trained pastor met alongside the lay pastor. The seminary-trained offered their perspective on the Lenten texts; the homegrown lay pastor helped the seminary-trained stranger with the Iowa culture. The budding friendships combatted the rampant loneliness. It became easier to draw pastors to a rural presbytery when the reputation spread of the collegiality, "how they love each other."

I realize I have stretched far beyond preaching into ministry, I am unrepentant. Preaching and ministry is complicated, challenging, and opportunistic these days, complicated with apathy, pandemics, natural disasters, and political divides. However there were also days, back in my forty years of ministry, when I considered following my big brother into truck driving. Now, in hindsight, I stand with the testimony of Lillian Daniel and Martin Copenhaver in their book *This Odd and Wondrous Calling*, and affirm it was worthy of a life.

When I preach Matthew 11:28-30 in Iowa in 2024, I will give attention to the yoke, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me." It is a shared yoke; Christ is in the lead position. It is a fitted yoke, tailor-made for each Christian and preacher. And, in this article I affirm we need a broader understanding of yoke; we are in this together.

Finally there is the rest, "And I will give your rest." I conclude with commentary on Matthew 11:28 from *Twenty-Four Hours a Day [Hazelden Meditations, September 25]*, a resource to help those who are addicted and a simple, basic Christian resource for all.

"God's everlasting arms are underneath all and will support you. Commune with God not so much for petitions to be granted as for the rest that comes from relying on His will and His purposes for your life. Be sure of God's strength available to you, be conscious of His support, and wait quietly until that true rest from God fills your being."