

“You can only do so much!”

Towards a healthy sense of our personal limitations

May 24, 2009

Text: Psalm 139:1-10, John 17:6-19

I.

Do you sometimes feel you’re being pulled in a thousand and one ways and that there’s just not enough time in a day? Try as you will ... knocking yourself out ... day after day: you just can’t get everything done.

This happens to many of us from time to time. It’s what we call *stress overload*. What *stress overload* signals for any of us is that we’ve got too much going on. We’re over-committed, overloaded.

- To any of us here this morning who are *stressed out* or over-committed and too busy, CHECK IT OUT:
- ***Memo from God: You can only do so much!***

Recently, it seems, I’ve been running into situations where forty-something younger mothers—happily married, for the most part—are locked into situations with a parent where caring for mom or dad has taken over their life.

In each case, the parent needs either an independent living or assisted living situation—apart from the daughter—where the parent has his/her basic needs met and where the daughter still has a life. (In these personal matters, we all have to sort this out for ourselves)

When we’re married ... and particularly when we’re married with children, there are limits to what we can do outside our immediate family.

Again, ***Memo from God: You can only do so much.***

For any of us, our primary commitment in life is to our spouse and to our children. That’s what the Bible teaches and it’s what enlightened *Marriage and Family* therapists advocate as well.

We can’t help but feel bad for these women. All they’re trying to do is be good daughters. In some family traditions—this is particularly true in Hispanic families—it’s often expected that the children will take care of their elderly parents. And the guilt, therefore, around this issue, runs deep.

But again, ***You can only do so much.***

II.

Making responsible decisions about what to do with an elderly parent can be an agonizing process. Still, there has to be some sorting out with regard to priorities, keeping in mind the long-term health of everyone in the family system.

It's one thing to help a family member out—particularly a mother or father—when they're going through a difficult experience. But it's another thing to let them suddenly take over your life. That's not good for anybody.

Sometimes, it can be helpful to ask ourselves: *what does love ask of us? What is the loving thing to do?*

The loving thing to do is to—first—take care of our spouse and children and then do what we can for other family members and friends, all the while realizing the need to have a healthy sense of our personal limitations.

Part of what this is about is accepting responsibility for taking care of ourself. We all have our limitations of energy and resources and, at the end of the day, in spite of the guilt part, ***We can only do so much.***

III.

My guess is that Jesus, too, struggled with issues of taking care of his flock—certainly, his disciples, but also others whom he knew in community. In fact, to some extent, that seems to be his struggle in the discourse speeches in John's gospel, from which our reading from **John 17** is taken this morning.

These discourse speeches of Jesus in John are deeply reflective with melancholic overtones. Jesus seems to be preparing both himself and the disciples for his own death, his own *going to the Father*.

Throughout this section of the gospel—from John 13 through 17—there are troubling tones to Jesus' words. It's like he's leaving but he has this lingering anxiety that his disciples are unprepared. And so he's praying for them ...

*Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me,
so that they may be one, as we are one.*

Earlier ... expressing his concern ... from John 14 ...

I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

Clearly, Jesus is trying to reassure his disciples that they're going to be okay. And then going on—these words from John 15:

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Again, Jesus is saying to his disciples: *You're going to be okay. Stay close to me ... abide in my love ... and your joy will be complete.*

In these exhortations and prayers, Jesus goes the second mile ... he does everything he can to reassure his disciples. The ultimate intent, of course, is to be reassuring to the Johanine community—the community of faith out of which John's gospel emerged.

But again—with Jesus, and with us, friends, ***you can only do so much.***

IV.

CHECK IT OUT, people! We're not machines. We're human beings ... each of us with very real human needs and limitations. There's only so much we can do, so much we can give, so much we can sacrifice.

What happens in many of our life situations (our families) is that we get tied in to certain expectations that are laid on us at birth. We grow up with them to the point where we think this is who we're supposed to be. However, sometimes these expectations are excessive ... unrealistic ... and, in the long run, not good for the well being of our immediate family.

On the one hand—again—we're trying to be a good son or daughter. However, on the other hand, there are limits to what we can do in our lives. Each of us has to learn to live within certain boundaries that enable us to be healthy people.

Part of the problem is that much of the time, we don't think like that—particularly the daughters. We don't even think we have rights to time constraints on our lives, rights to be happy. And thus, we get co-opted into being the care-giver daughter or son; and that can be okay, up to a point. But, again, ***we can only do so much.***

For starters, we all need to discover enough about who we are as a person to know our limitations. What are our limits—in terms of time and energy and the emotional strain on our spirit, to say nothing of the wear and tear on our bodies?

And then, understanding our personal limitations, we need the courage to make decisions in our lives that reflect these limitations; and NOT—and this is perhaps the most important part—not feel guilty about it.

V.

There's something more that needs to be said here:

*Each of us has a right to be a healthy person ...and, therefore, to live a healthy life ...which means a life with enough balance in it so **you have a life**, as the saying goes.*

In any family, every family member has legitimate needs, along with the right—within reasonable boundaries—for those needs to be met (we're talking about basic needs). However, for this to happen, we all have to make adjustments. We all have to do our fair share, be flexible and adaptable, and *love one another as we want to be loved*.

Sometimes, what's going on in our wider family is that there are selfish, self-centered people; and now and then, although it pains us to say it, these people are our parents.

When this is the case, all we can do, is explain things to them, as lovingly as we can: what the situation is and what our personal needs are in relation to them—reassuring them, as best we can, along the way—and then, expect them to adjust.

These sorts of family decisions are never easy; because, again, we feel responsible (which is usually a good thing); but we also, much of the time, feel guilty. And it's this guilt part we need to sort out because it tears us up.

At this point, what the gospel invites us to do is take it to God. God understands. And in prayer, over time, we'll come to a sense of inner peace.

The words of Jesus from **Matthew 11** are for us:

- *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.*
- *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*
- *For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*

VI.

You see, friends, in all of this, God knows ... God knows our every need, our every heartbreak.

As the **Psalmist** reminds us in our reading this morning from **Psalm 139** ...

***O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;***

you discern my thoughts from far away.

You search out my path and are acquainted with my ways ...

God knows—our needs, our strengths and weaknesses.

The message from God this morning, friends, is a word of support for those exhausted and drained by their family relationships and commitments; and for any of us, as well, stressed out by the daily demands on our life:

You can only do so much! Lighten up on yourself; whatever your limitations are with regard to your personal needs, that's who you are ... and that's okay.

God did not intend for you to *not* have a life ... and to not be free to give yourself, joyfully, to your marriage and to your children or to whatever your life-situation is.

You can only do so much! God understands ... and love understands.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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