

December 29th: Caregiver Fatigue

Good morning, my friends, and Merry Christmas! I hope you and your loved ones had a wonderful time together on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and I look forward to hearing more about your holidays when I return from vacation on January 2nd.

For now, I want to welcome you to another meditation in our series, “Soulcare: Help For Heavy Times”. This is our new focus for the year, and we’ve been trying something new in terms of sermon style and topic. We’ve still been looking at passages from all parts of our Bible, but we’ll be doing it with a new intention, and that intention revolves around our desire to see this congregation continue to grow as a healthy, life-giving, safe, and compassionate community.

To that end, we’ve been discussing a wide range of topics related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. In the month of December, our mini series is “Blue Christmas,” because we know that this time of year can be particularly difficult for folks dealing with mental health conditions and difficult family situations—it can feel hard to be festive when you’re struggling internally, so we hope that these meditations have given you permission to take care of yourself and find support. Before we dive in, I invite you to pray with me.

Gentle God, there are many of us who do the sacred work of caring for others, and we are honored to love others in the way that you have loved us. But we acknowledge that this labor of love can wear on us, it can shift from an honor to a burden when we are worn out and tired. Remind us this morning of your good news for weary souls, and call us into forms of caregiving that fill our souls with purpose and life. Amen.

When our team thought about how to wrap up this Blue Christmas series, we wanted to pick a topic that might be a more overlooked aspect of what makes holidays difficult for some people. We’ve talked about common conditions like

anxiety and depression, as well as ongoing experiences like chronic illness and grief—so on this final Sunday, we decided to focus on something a little more specific, and that is the reality of caregiver fatigue.

Being a caregiver has been woven into our human communities since the beginning of our species—we’ve always been drawn together in relationships that require care and support on some level. It’s in our DNA to protect and nurture each other, and people of all genders can find themselves in roles that involve some kind of caregiving responsibility. And this experience of providing care and protection is part of every phase of our life cycle—from birth until our very last breath.

Former First Lady Rosalynn Carter was known for her work with caregivers and caregiving needs, and part of her legacy is the enduring advocacy of the Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregivers. When asked about the importance of caregivers and caregiving, First Lady Carter responded, “There are only 4 kinds of people in the world- those who have been caregivers, those who are currently caregivers, those who will be caregivers and those who will need caregivers.” A spokesperson for the Institute later added, “[caregiving] will affect all of us at some point in our lives. She recognized – long before most of us – that caregivers serve as the backbone of this country and they are in crisis.”

That’s right, experts say that caregivers in our nation are experiencing a crisis—and it’s not an individual, personal problem, it’s a collective issue that is impacting all of us.

Most organizations and efforts to support the work of caregiving have focused on caregivers who primarily focus on the elderly, the ill, or the disabled—and all of those are indispensable roles in our society. But, this morning, I want to broaden the category just slightly, and speak to anyone who is in the midst of a caregiving journey, including anyone who is currently raising children or working with kids and families. I think that sometimes these roles, although they are lauded publicly in our culture, are often overlooked in private—we

loudly proclaim how much we love mothers, and fathers, and nurses, and preschool teachers, nannies, and more—but our actions don't always match up with our words. Despite our vocal adoration for caregivers, we don't have paid family leave, or adequate national resources for respite care, or supportive systems for people living with disabilities. In fact, our society seems to devalue the work of caregivers, and most caregiving responsibilities fall on the shoulders of individuals who are unpaid or underpaid.

To add to that, as many of us know, caregiving is not glamorous work. If you're a parent, you know that there are diapers to be changed, doctors appointments to be scheduled, meals to prepare, toys to clean up, and laundry to do—all before the cycle repeats again the next day. Every day is a Groundhog Day experience of dirty dishes, messy playrooms, running out of berries because your toddler ate them all in one sitting, and almost losing your sanity by bedtime. If you're a caregiver for a person with disabilities or the elderly, you know that your days are full of checking in about pain or discomfort, cooking meals that fit their needs, keeping track of medication or therapies, driving to appointments, and being vigilant around the clock. The mental load can be overwhelming, as you try to juggle all kinds of tasks, and so many different expectations.

And the weight of all of this can seem to double during the holidays.

Parents are tasked with making Christmas magic, keeping traditions alive, preparing for visits to extended family, and more. There are probably some parents who are listening right now who are absolutely worn out from the past few days, or weeks, of events, gatherings, shopping trips, big fancy meals, and other festive activities. You have my full permission to take a nap right now, I won't judge you if you just close your eyes and rest for a few minutes.

Other caregivers might be struggling because necessary medical treatments are harder to access during this time, or local organizations that normally provide support are shut down. A critical routine might be disrupted, or services that you rely on are less frequently available, leaving the person in

your care vulnerable. You might be unable to get away or take a much needed break, or find space to care for yourself in the way that you'd like to—and that can make it hard to fully enjoy this holiday season and all of the joy that can be part of these special days. You can take a nap too—you've more than earned it.

No matter what kind of caregiver you are, I want to take a minute to acknowledge the tremendous effort that you put into the selfless work that you do. This community acknowledges the importance of what you are doing, day in and day out, and it is understandable if you are reaching a point of fatigue or burnout. You're not alone, up to 52% of caregivers recently surveyed reported that they had less time for themselves, and less time meaningful relationships in their life.

Caregiving is a noble and deeply significant act, but when it has an impact on our souls, something in our culture needs to shift. It is a wonderful thing to raise children and to teach the next generation, and to provide necessary medical care, but it shouldn't have to come at the expense of our own wellbeing. Giving to others shouldn't be expected to result in forgetting about ourselves.

I wish I could snap my fingers and fix the systems in our world that make caregiving such an exhausting experience. I wish I could make it easier for you, if you're currently going through a season of caregiving that is impacting your health and happiness. But unfortunately, I can't. At least, I can't do it alone. If this is a cause that is close to your heart, there are ways to move the needle, both locally and nationally, and overtime, we might be able to move towards a better culture and a stronger system that values the role and responsibilities of caregivers.

But while we're still in the messy middle, you might be asking, what hope can be found in our faith? What encouragement can God give us during these times of fatigue and stress?

Well, our passage for today comes from the New Testament, after the life and ministry of Jesus. In his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul addresses a fractured church in the Greek city of Philippi. Part theology, part testimony, and part advice, Paul shares wisdom for this group of people who are trying to navigate life's many challenges together. In this final chapter, Paul prepares to say goodbye to his friends and fellow Christians, and he speaks about his current situation in prison. Paul writes, "I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." And then, he goes on to share this sentiment: "I can do all this through him who gives me strength." Other translations of the Bible say it this way: "For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength."

I don't want to diminish this statement, especially if it has been impactful for you at some point. Paul is right that the power and strength of Jesus does give us the tremendous ability to endure difficult situations in our lives—and our faith can be a source of comfort when everything else around us feels chaotic and exhausting. But I understand if this doesn't resonate with you—it's often been used by modern Christians on self help posters and in motivational speeches, and it can end up feeling a little trite or cheesy.

So instead, I want to take Paul's words about what it means to be in need, and look to the end of our passage, because Paul wraps up his letter with this encouragement: "And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus."

This is what Paul places his faith in, even more so than his ability to endure difficult circumstances with God's help: God will meet all of our needs through Jesus. And this is my prayer for you this morning—that God will meet all of your needs this week, and in all of the weeks to come. I pray that God will give you patience when you need it most, strength for those early mornings and late nights, and grace for yourself when you feel overwhelmed. I pray that God will

give you rest when your body and mind are weary, encouragement when you are seeking clarity or support, and comfort that will fill your soul to sustain you. This is my prayer for your sacred work: God will care for you, as you care for others.

My friends, may God's Advent hope, love, joy, and peace continue to guide you in this Christmas season, I look forward to seeing you in 2025.

Amen.