

## “Institutional Fatigue”

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Acts 15

Do you remember when you and Zoom were first introduced? My first meeting was about five years ago, and I remember how refreshing it was to move from a phone in the middle of the table for those who had to call in to a meeting to being able to see faces on the screen. “It’s just like being around the table,” I said. “What a great platform!”

Today, I feel differently. I am tired of Zoom and platforms like it. I am thankful that it has allowed the means for staying connected to loved ones and friends when face-to-face gatherings were restricted. I am grateful that, because of Zoom, good work and professional collaboration have been able to continue even across miles and time zones. Many have enjoyed other advantages like eliminating stressors such as long commutes or having to travel in bad weather and we’ve only needed to be concerned about appropriate attire from the waist up.

There were adjustments to be made; technical issues for sure,” Can you hear me? Can you see me?” remembering to mute so that the coo coo clock doesn’t interrupt the meeting, realizing that you had to pay for a meeting over 40 minutes, selecting the appropriate background, etiquette involved with the chat and changing agendas to fit a virtual environment. A few months ago, I moderated a Zoom session meeting of another church and at the end of the meeting, I prayed for everyone’s safe trip home. Someone said, “Thanks for the prayer. I’ll try not to trip going from my office to my living room.”

There’s also the awareness that no matter how much support was given, many just could not access this platform. It isn’t inclusive. Some people, especially students, have been left out.

Zoom Fatigue is a real thing which comes from the repeated use of on-line meetings and the impact of looking into faces including our own for extended times, limited peripheral vision, and greater intensity of content and the effect all of that and more has on our brains. The Stanford University has even developed a tool to measure Zoom Fatigue.

But Zoom fatigue aside, as we transition back to in-person settings, we come into this chapter with a generalized sense of fatigue brought on by the way every corner of life was upended by Covid 19.

And not that we are out of it yet, but how are our societal institutions going to emerge out of this pandemic? We will not be going back to the way things were in January of 2020, so how will the institutions of education, workplace economics, political sectors, the family and religious organizations make adjustments?

Dr. Lankin Powell, a conservationist and professor at the University of Nebraska predicts that there will be greater vulnerability to **Institutional fatigue** during this time of transition as mission direction gets reinterpreted and conflicting priorities emerge about what is important and essential to an organization.

It's hard to believe that the word "fatigue" was at one time not even in the English language. Its use began in the seventeenth century when it came from the French and Latin words meaning "**to cause to breakdown.**" The word never appears in any Shakespeare plays and in scripture, there is no direct translation from the Hebrew or the Greek.

**But when there is fatigue, things break down.**

We're not going to share Zoom fatigue stories this morning, but I do want us to consider institutional fatigue as it relates to the church. As we transition back from a year of being completely virtual to a time of re-gathering and re-connecting, it seems like an appropriate occasion to think about the energy we have for continuing to be the church.

Just how energetic are **you** feeling about church right now as we face this time of transition? How can we anticipate what challenges will arise and how will we come together to face them? For more than a year, almost everything we did was completely virtual, live streaming worship, Zoom meetings, Zoom youth groups, Zoom adult education classes, children's Sunday school delivered to porches in activity boxes, mission that was streamlined because there could not be direct contact.

We will continue to live stream and many of you will continue to find yourselves in pajamas on Sunday mornings instead of your Sunday best. What will we do about Christian Education since the vaccine is not yet available for our children under twelve? Will people really come back to church, or have they become used to that free time on Sunday mornings? What's going to be set in place for mission trips and getting to the places and populations who need our help when we are uncertain about some of the health risks?

The church is entering a time of transition and we are entering it with some **depleted energy**, because for many reasons both personal and societal this past year has made us tired.

Father Avery Dulles who was the major architect in the transition in the Roman Catholic Church following Vatican II in the 1960s, states that often in transitions, churches become very concerned with governance, form, function, rules and structure, fearing the loss of stability without these. The attitude is "All right, we know there will be changes" only then to adamantly insist that governance and rules and protocols continue to hold their weight and stay primary and indispensable. Then the church falls into judging itself according to unyielding polity rather than values of the Gospel of Jesus Christ- freedom, justice, peace, compassion, and reconciliation, in a changing world.

The story that we are given this morning in Acts 15 gives us wise insight into how to approach times of transition in the life of the church. It's hard to believe that such an old story has something to teach us for such a time as this. Acts 15 is often thought of as the story of the first church fight. Tensions were high as adjustment and change were required, but to view this story as only about a fight in church shortchanges its depth and meaning.

To name the issue at hand, the news about Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection has spread beyond Jerusalem, which means that those Gentiles have joined the original Jewish converts.

What we need to understand is that the early converts to Christianity were not completely abandoning Judaism to become Christian. They still maintained with passion and fervor their laws and traditions, and this included laws from the Book of Leviticus as to how those outside of the Jewish traditions (the Gentiles) could interact with those inside those traditions. So, the challenge was to find a means whereby the Gentile Christians could join the Jewish Christians without violating the conscience of the latter.

Of course, this all seems inconsequential to us sitting here in 2021. Our reaction is “What’s the big deal here?” Well, it was a big deal. As the church evolved and became more Gentile and less Jewish, the consideration of the Jewish laws became less of a concern. But not at the end of the first century.

Paul and Barnabas who had been preaching outside the Jerusalem center in Antioch came to this church meeting and reported that the Gentiles were not too keen on agreeing to circumcision. What those from Judea thought was that there’s no salvation without circumcision. It wasn’t that circumcision itself was the means, but it was an important mark of signifying one’s identity as a member of God’s people. And yes, you’re thinking is correct that it’s very exclusive to men only and if there’s one thing we learn in the stories of Jesus, it is that he was not exclusive often at the risk of his own safety.

This church meeting story is told to us in eleven verses, which does not give us an appreciation of the time frame and how long these leaders have been away from one another. There’s no text messaging, facetime or means of staying in touch.

It would have been easier if the Jewish Christians had just kept to their ways and their little group. It would have been easier for Paul and Barnabas to have taken the attitude that they were just going to stay in Antioch and do things their way. But that was not the unity that was called for in their purpose and efforts.

In these verses, we don’t get a sense of the intensity of the arguments that took place, the efforts and energy it took to adjudicate the issue and confront the controversy. We don’t get the moans and groans from the Jewish Christians as they saw Paul and Barnabas coming towards them after being in Antioch. We don’t get Paul and Barnabas’s conversation along the way about these bureaucrats in Jerusalem that they were going to have to face.

All of us have experienced conflict in our institutions be it religion, family, economics, politics, education, workplace. We know how tired it can make us and we blame the rigidity and inflexibility on the institution itself. We think there’s nothing we can do so we might as well avoid the conflict, keep our mouths shut and our heads down and do our thing as much as we can get away with. Let the institution be the institution.

That is NOT what took place in Acts 15. It’s a turning point for the institution of the early church, an emergence into a new time and a new way of being the church which called for some

hard changes in an institution whose purpose is not to be a machine of hierarchy and rules, but to support a mission.

**This is what took place at the Jerusalem Council. Take heed!**

1. There was great controversy, great consternation over what should be prioritized. But as hard as it was, they confronted controversy without being destroyed by it.
2. There was no, “Well, whatever feels right to you is okay with me. Do your own thing in Antioch.” They took concerns seriously and tried to find where they could come together. Paul, who was a Pharisee, a scholar of the Jewish law, knew not to be too quick to lay aside historic standards of doctrines and morality and blithely label them irrelevant.
3. There were good faith arguments of clarity and courage, and by that, I mean, they cared more about the mission of the church, then their individual visceral feelings about what they personally wanted.
4. James, the leader of the Jerusalem Council, responsible for upholding tradition, as hard as it might have been for him knew that the old centers are sometimes inflexible and incapable of responding to challenges of the moment and that the direction needed is often not heard from the center but from those who have heeded the call to venture beyond the edges. Paul and Barnabas and their experience in Antioch needed to be heard.
5. There was prayer and faith that the Holy Spirit was at work opening new ways and widening horizons in the most far flung of places.
6. They maintained a governance and structure but not as an indispensable priority, but in perspective with the other aspect of the church’s mission.
7. Their focus was Jesus, they continued to tell the stories of Jesus, they centered their mission on continuing Jesus’ work in the world. Their leaders were not managing bureaucrats, but faithful followers discerning God’s dream for the world and working towards that dream.

We will have different challenges, but as we emerge from the intense time of a worldwide pandemic, we may also be at an important turning point in the life of the church. **Stay tuned, because I will go into more detail next week.** But you know... Maybe we’re just too tired to even think about it

Or maybe we can gather in our small groups, reconnect, come together for worship either in person or virtual, examine our priorities in light of the Gospel and trust that God will equip us with in a new day with energy, imagination, intelligence and love for the work, life and adventures for which we are created and to which we are called.

The author Nials Williams, in his novel, “This is Happiness” tells this story. It might be familiar to you. He writes:

**You see, we were given a garden. It was created over many, many years with water, the soil of the earth, the sun to light the day and the moon to light the night. There was vegetation and plants and trees that bore seeds. Seasons and sacred times evolved as did creatures of the sea and of the land, and birds that flew in the air. Humankind was created in the image of the Creator. They were created not as hierarchies to one another or to hold power over one another but as helpmates. And there was work, hard work, good work, responsibility to care for the garden. Community was created because humankind was told that they could increase in number and fill the whole garden of the earth. There was rest. There was beauty. There was justice. There was peace. The garden was created and given for no reason other than love.**

Does this story sound familiar?

Well, then you know that we lost this garden.

Williams writes, “So, throughout our whole lives, we have to remake it.”

BUT... Maybe we’re just too tired.

Or maybe we will remake it. Maybe we must. Can we? Will we?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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