

## “Margin”

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First United Methodist Church of Wausau  
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Psalm 139:17-24

How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!  
How vast is the sum of them!  
I try to count them—they are more than the sand;  
I come to the end—I am still with you.  
O that you would kill the wicked, O God,  
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—  
those who speak of you maliciously,  
and lift themselves up against you for evil!  
Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?  
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?  
I hate them with perfect hatred;  
I count them my enemies.  
Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my thoughts.  
See if there is any wicked way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.

I'm tired. Are you tired? Are you bone-achingly weary? Or are you falling-down exhausted?

Today's sermon is different than I thought it would be when I started it last week. I like to get an early start on sermon-writing but so many tasks needed my attention that it was Wednesday before I could begin putting words together. Then I spent Thursday at a training at the Conference office in Sun Prairie.

That afternoon I felt like an elephant was sitting on my chest. As Sue talked about ways we could be more effective leaders of our churches, I thought of the many things I could do better, the many things I hadn't even gotten to. I was lamenting to myself that there is still so much work ahead but I felt like I drained, used up.

Would you join me with your imagination for a few minutes? We'll enter into the Land of Overload. Many, many people live in Overload. People take longer in the supermarket because they have so many lists, they can't find the one with the groceries on it. They sit staring at intersections not seeing the green light because they're thinking about that next task. Everything is urgent. Everything is critical. Emergencies are the norm. People don't sleep well. They snap at their loved ones and skip days off to try to catch up. Stress-related disease is the number one killer.

Some people are very good at pretending they have it all together. You hardly ever see a crack in their façade. Others are clearly overwhelmed. Between careers and other jobs, family concerns, and all the rest, they're in a constant struggle to get everything done. They smile or wave as they dash past their friends on the street. If they can just keep going and maybe pick up the pace a bit, they might be able to get it all done before they crash and fall into bed.

I visited the land of Overload last week. Some of you did too.

We're about halfway through our sermon series about "Works in Progress." In the last few weeks, we've been reminded that not only does God make us but God makes us the way we are. God knows all our idiosyncrasies, all our shortcomings and successes. And knowing us, better than we know ourselves, God loves us and is always, always with us.

God empowers us to be our best selves, leading lives of compassion and justice, loving on everyone, and doing our part and accepting that this is enough. Some of us have trouble accepting this. We say, "There's so much to do. I should do more!" In a world of pain and despair, compassionate people can end up pretending that we're superheroes, trying to do it all. But we're human. And while that may not be as exciting as being Ladybug or The Flash, being human is very good.

One corollary to all of this is that God is God and we're not. Today's theme "Even when we're at our worst" is about forgetting this.

This morning, I suggest that we're at our worst when we forget that God is God and we're not. We're at our worst when we try to do it all – even as we're trying to be at our best, even when we are doing all we can for the best of reasons.

I don't want to offend anyone. I realize you're doing the best you can. But I ask you, as I ask myself, is this really what God wants for us?

Today's culture is one of speed. Things are changing so rapidly. More and more is being expected of us, faster and faster. All of this means that we're exceeding our limits time and again, in many facets of our lives. People collapse in exhaustion, wondering what happened.

In Paul's letter to the house church in Philippi, he writes, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." This is such an empowering verse but it can lead us into a trap too. Some Christians have used it as a call to busyness. If I believe that Christ strengthens me, then I can do all things. I can do all things. But there are limits. Again, we're human.

How good are you at setting limits? I remember when my mother retired some years ago. Although she hadn't intended to, she ended up becoming much more active in church, in the UMW in particular. A few months into her "leisure years" she told me she needed to learn to sit on her hands when someone was asking who would help.

She knew a limiting behavior that could help in her situation. But sometimes we're at a loss as to how to establish appropriate, healthy limits. Pastors struggle with this but I'm not so self-absorbed as to assume we're the only ones.

We all stand in need of the power which Christ supplies to equip us for effective ministry. Yet neither Christ nor the apostle Paul, who wrote the verse, expected us to be all things to all people. No, we are called to count on Christ as we seek to be faithful to his call on our lives. But this empowerment includes the ability to discern what we can faithfully do and what limits we need to be set.

Overload is defined as the point where our limits are exceeded. I mentioned a few signs of overload earlier; others include: a perceived loss of options, an inability to absorb more information, an inability to make positive changes in destructive patterns. I'd suggest one more that isn't so neatly wrapped – we believe the worst about ourselves.

Jason, another pastor at Thursday's meeting, was talking about another training he'd been to where they were instructed to draw a line down the middle of a sheet of paper. In one column

they were to list good things about themselves and on the other side, growing edges. He looked at the paper and just knew that the second column would be easier.

We've each been facing our weaknesses since we were about five years old – can't color in the lines, can't write cursive, can't this, can't that. People around us seemed to give so much attention to what we couldn't do and so little attention to our good qualities that we thought that's how it must be. We even learned names for people who put emphasize their skills and gifts.

I wonder if you could fill out that plus column. Would you be willing to take that on as a challenge this week? Don't bother with the minus column; we each know all about that.

We're all overloaded at least sometimes. What can we do about it? Finding balance would help, but how do we achieve balance? Taking care of ourselves helps – sleep, exercise, eating well, and such. But here's another suggestion – margin. Would you take a pencil or pen and write down that word some place where you'll see it later?

Think of margin as the opposite of overload. It's related to our reserves, the space, if you will, between our load and our limits.

Overload it valued in our world today. It's... expected. We push ourselves to the limit and then we try to push past the limit. We spend more money, but also more time and energy, than we have. We work hard, play hard, entertain and vacation hard, and we crash hard.

It sounds crazy when it's said out loud, doesn't it.

What if we intentionally created a plan to set reserves in our time and energy. 10% would be great, but 5% might be more reasonable. If we would do this, it would be a game-changer. We'd see the world differently. We'd be ready for life's possibilities.

The trick is that you have to be able to identify the non-essentials that drain your time and energy. You have to accept that you can't do it all. Yes, it's hard but we so need this!

Imagine you're presented with a challenging opportunity. With a margin in place, you wouldn't have to add it to an already overloaded calendar. You wouldn't feel like you're stretched to the point of breaking.

We need this. We need it but no one out there is going to encourage us to do it. But when we look to scripture, we find a model.

Jesus! He never seemed to be in a hurry. He did not work 24/7. He went to sleep at night without having healed every person of every disease. He practiced healthy limits. He did not visit every person who was in need nor did he teach everyone.

Jesus knew what it meant to be human in the fullest sense. Jesus knew that in order to be who God needed him to be, he had to set limits. And he had to prioritize and balance in light of those limits so that he could focus on what was truly important.

What would it mean for you to set a margin for yourself? Would you give it some thought? In what ways might God work through you differently if you allowed room in your days to be human?