

Add that to the “more than a month” list, I thought. My “more than a month” list is just that -- a list of all the things I haven’t done in more than a month, all the things that used to be part of my “old normal,” all the things that are no longer part of my “new normal,” thanks to COVID-19. It’s a long list, this “more than a month” list... and it’s only getting longer.

It has been more than a month since I’ve set foot in a grocery store, or checked a book out of the public library, or mailed a package from the post office. It has been more than a month since I’ve set off on my Monday morning commute or picked up the kiddos from the bus. It has been more than a month since I’ve shaken anyone’s hand or hugged anyone I’m not married or mother to. It has been more than a month since I’ve seen my parents (except on a screen). It has been more than a month since I’ve gone out to lunch with a friend. And it has been more than a month since I’ve had a really good burger.

I know, I know... in light of all the actual struggles brought on by coronavirus, it’s the most minor of COVID hardships. But right now, I am craving a really good burger... you know, the kind you get at a hip gastropub or your favorite greasy-spoon diner. We could make burgers at home, of course, but that’s not quite the same. We could even order burgers for take-out, but even that’s not quite the same. There’s nothing quite like a good, juicy burger, hot off the grill. (I know, I should probably be encouraging everyone to eat healthy right now... but let’s be real. Kale has never made me feel like a good burger makes me feel. Man, I need a good burger.)

I’m craving a good burger this week, not only because of my “more than a month” COVID list, but also because of our “brown bag” inspiration item for today’s sermon. Throughout this season of Easter, we’re keeping with a favorite tradition of mine: “sermons from a brown bag,” sermons inspired by the random household items

sent in by all of you. I do this every year during the season of Easter because it's fun and challenging for me to see what kinds of sermons can be inspired by seemingly un-inspired things. But I also do this every year during the season of Easter because I believe that Easter changes everything, that Easter's good news touches everything. Because of that, everything around us -- and I mean everything -- is imbued with the capacity to offer us a glimpse of God, if we have eyes to see.

In the first week of this series, Pastor Debbie's collapsible trivet -- an item meant to protect surfaces from damage and harm -- drew us to the words of Psalm 23, words that remind us to find comfort in God's protection. The next week, Dave Siegfried's outlet cover -- an item meant to keep little hands from dangerous outlets -- drew us to the words of the book of James, words that call us to care for the most vulnerable among us. Last week, Joe Kempfer's box of bandaids -- an item that is as much about calm as it is about healing -- drew us to the words of Psalm 46 and its most calming verse: "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10, NRSV). This week, we turn to yet another brown bag item, courtesy of Patti Tironi: a hamburger patty shaper and press. (See why I'm craving burgers, church?)



Patti's patty-shaper (wow, I just put that together, Patti's patty-shaper... sorry Patti, I know how it feels, my name is Candy, for goodness' sake) may have an image of a cow on the front, but it can be used for more than just beef burgers. A burger shaper and press like that one can be used to make crab cakes, or turkey burgers, or fancy stuffed burgers -- and can help you do so without getting

your hands too messy. You just ball up whatever protein you're using, place in the shaper, and press down to form it into a patty shape.

That's how you use it. But how do you preach it? Well, it's used to shape and form something... so maybe that "potter and clay" passage from the prophet Jeremiah? God shapes us and molds us? But then... in that Bible metaphor, God's the potter and we humans are the clay... so if we stretch that metaphor to this brown bag item, God would be the chef and we humans would be the ground beef... and... yeah, never mind.

What else? Well, this hamburger press does have an image of a cow on it... so we could always turn to that passage from Exodus where the Israelite fashion an image of a cow and then... worship it... and God gets really mad. You know, on second thought, I'm not really in the mood for a story about judgment and divine anger.

This hamburger press once belonged to Patti's grandmother, was passed down from her grandmother... so there's a seed of something there, too. Psalm 78, maybe? Those beautiful words about how we pass the faith down from one generation to the next? That's a possibility.

As I was trying to figure out the direction for this brown bag item, I asked Patti to tell me more about her grandmother, more about the woman who originally owned that hamburger patty press. She told me about the picnics and cookouts at her grandmother's house. She told me about other items she had inherited from her grandmother. She described her grandmother as a woman who was loving, warm, kind, gentle... and strong. "She had a hard life," Patti wrote, "but she prevailed."

That connection to her grandmother is part of why I wanted to feature this hamburger patty press today, on Mother's Day... and those words describing her grandmother -- words of strength and survival and perseverance -- helped me find the direction and the scripture for this hamburger patty press, this device that presses in

from top and bottom and sides. Earlier in worship, Pastor Debbie read the apostle Paul's "pressing" words from 2 Corinthians:

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. ⁸ We are hard pressed [*pressed!*] on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. ¹⁰ We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹ For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body.

(2 Corinthians 4:7-11, NIV)

Here in this part of this second letter to the Corinthians church, the apostle Paul is writing of great hardship. And for Paul, "hardship" is no abstract concept. He lives it. He is imprisoned for the sake of the gospel. He is injured and shipwrecked for the sake of the gospel. He is run out of town and put on trial for the sake of the gospel. Eventually, he is killed for the sake of the gospel. Paul is no stranger to hardship -- especially hardship for the sake of the gospel.

Yet while he is faced with hardship, even *overwhelmed* by hardship, he is not *overcome* by that hardship. He writes: "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Corinthians 4:8-9, NIV).

We are hard pressed on every side.

I think that language resonates with us in this moment, a moment of... well... hardship. Of course, the hardships we're experiencing in the midst of this global pandemic aren't identical to the hardships and persecutions confronting Paul. I don't want to draw too clear a parallel there... but this is a time of hardship for us... hardships,

it seems, pressing in from every side. We're experiencing the hardship of disrupted routines, the hardship of lost jobs, the hardship of fear and insecurity, the hardship of threatened health, the hardship of reduced income, the hardship of lost opportunities, the hardship of loneliness and isolation, the hardship of personal risk, the hardships of COVID-19.

Those hardships are real, and they're pressing in on every side... so perhaps it's a comfort, in this moment, to hear Paul's words: "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed." *But not crushed*. Right now, as we feel the seeming crush of COVID-19, it's encouraging to hear that language, that "but not" language. Hard pressed on every side, but not crushed. That's encouraging.

I wonder if that's what Paul intended, in writing these words -- to encourage other hard-pressed followers of Jesus. Or perhaps he intended to educate and instruct them. I don't know for sure what he intended. What I *do* know for sure is what he *didn't* intend. In writing these words, Paul did not intend to herald his own strength in the face of hardship. (A few chapters later, he all but mocks that kind of apostolic grandstanding.)¹

Paul doesn't intend to highlight his own strength. He intends to highlight God's. At the start of this passage, he writes: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7, NIV). *This all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*

And here's the good news: the incomparable power of God at work in Paul's life is the same power at work in ours, too. The inexhaustible strength of God that sustained Paul in the face of his hardships is the same strength that will sustain us in ours. And

¹ Lois Malcolm, "Commentary on 2 Corinthians 4:5-12," on Working Preacher. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3669

that's good news... because in the midst of a situation as overwhelming as a global pandemic, I could use a little incomparable power and inexhaustible strength.

Friends, in the face of a situation as far-reaching, world-changing, and hardship-producing as a global pandemic, I don't have all the answers. I don't always have all the hope. I *certainly* don't have all the strength. But this I have, and I offer it to you:

Right now, you may be feeling completely overwhelmed -- almost overcome, even -- by what you're experiencing in the midst of this pandemic. You may feel like you've had to deal with more than your share of hardship. You may feel like there is nothing in your life that corona hasn't marred with its touch. You may feel like every time you start to gain a little bit of equilibrium, a new wave of hardship knocks you off your feet again. You may feel like it can't possibly get any worse (and then, too often, it does). You may feel hard pressed on every side. You may feel close to being crushed. You may feel like you can't take any more.

To you, I say: it's not about what you can take, and thank goodness for that. It's not about what you can take. It's about what God can take, and God's power is incomparable, God's strength inexhaustible. You don't have to depend on your own strength, any more than Paul did. You get to depend on God's strength, just like Paul did.

So in those moments when coronavirus presses in from every side and overwhelms your faltering strength, may you turn, in prayer, to God. May you seek, and learn to depend on, the strength of God. And then -- bolstered by God's incomparable power, God's inexhaustible strength -- may you, with Paul, say: *I am hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; struck down, but not destroyed.*