

I Timothy 4.1-5
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Taking Care

I got a greeting card in the mail last week, from Kaiser Permanente. Maybe some of you got one too? It's a lot like a "Get Well Card," with cheerful, calming art work on the cover – except that I'm not sick! So, I guess it's more of a "Be Well" card or "Stay Well." The words on the front are: Take care. Be Well. Thrive.

And the message inside encourages me to practice self-care, and offers me some tips on how to manage my stress. There was even a "mindfulness exercise" printed on a little card for me to keep with me.

It was very thoughtful. I guess....

Something else that happened to me last week is that three different people in my life, just out of the blue, started talking to me about massages, and what a great thing massage therapy is. One of them was a neighbor, whom I barely know, who started telling me about these great massages he gets, and how they relieve his stress.

Which is great.

Apparently, stress and self-care are very much on our minds these days. Which is understandable, because you and I are living through a very stressful time. Power outages, the threat of wildfires, earthquakes, gun violence, immigrants' horror stories, the Kurds, Ukraine, and of course, the impeachment investigation: there's fresh chaos in the news every day.

Also, in our personal lives, many of us face troubled relationships, work-related stress, financial worries, health concerns.

It is indeed a stressful time. You know, I generally see myself as an upbeat, hopeful person. But I tell you, these few years have been difficult. Some days I'm full of outrage and anger; other days I'm overcome with sadness, and I find that my tears are very near the surface.

I learned recently that some therapists have identified an emotional disorder affecting people across this country, which they call, Trump Anxiety Disorder. Trump Anxiety Disorder. Now, please understand, I first discovered this, not from a "liberal media" source; but instead, on a website called Baptist Global News. According to Baptist News, no matter where you are on the political spectrum - whether you are constantly fuming about the President, or generally supportive of him – the fact remains that, across the board, Americans are suffering from a heightened level of anxiety these days, caused by the chaos, the uncertainty, and especially, the divisiveness in our politics, as we divide up the world into "us" and "them."

I have two brothers, whom I love and respect. We share the same solid Midwestern upbringing and values; and they are both good people. And yet, I don't talk to either one of them much these days; because we have landed on opposite sides in the great Culture War that divides our nation.

Both of my brothers are Trump supporters; who are worried about too many immigrants, too many changes, too much cultural diversity happening too quickly. This has driven a wedge in our family. And it breaks my heart.

On another website, I found psychologists discussing PSD - Political Stress Disorder. They say that underneath all the vitriol and our righteous anger, the truth is

that we are grieving. We grieve a loss of civility and the absence of a sense of the Common Good across America. And all of this stress makes us sick; we are worried sick about the future of our nation.

Now, these psychologists also say that the more you follow the news, the worse you are affected by Political Stress Disorder - PSD. And so, they suggest a good strategy to help lower your stress is: to just turn off the news! Stop watching so much, and reading everything in sight; stop paying so much attention.

This, of course, is easier said than done! It's hard to turn away, hard to ignore all the chaos. But maybe we can at least cut back; maybe take a sabbatical from the news for a day or two.

Now, back to Kaiser Permanente for a moment. I know full well that they sent me that "Get Well Card" or "Be Well Card" as a marketing gimmick; after all, for those of us on Medicare, this just happens to be Open Enrollment season. Still, that doesn't mean that Kaiser is wrong in encouraging us to think about how we are managing our stress.

In fact, the question I want to ask you today is, "What are you doing to care for yourself in the Age of Trump?" What strategies are you using to take care of your own emotional and spiritual well-being? What are you doing to keep from being overwhelmed by anger, or sadness, or despair?

Now, Kaiser suggests that I try a simple mindfulness exercise. Get comfortable; breathe slowly and deeply; count your breaths, 1-10, in and out. When your mind wanders, come back to your breath. That's it. It's a lot like what Curran has us do, as we start worship every Sunday.

And again, I have to say that Kaiser is not wrong in suggesting that we do something like this for ourselves: that we be intentional about self-care, and caring for our own spiritual well-being.

As Parker Palmer says, "Self-care is never a selfish act." Nourishing our souls in this way can certainly lower the stress we feel. It can break a cycle of negativity. It can help us to be more compassionate and more positive, and better able to cope with whatever comes.

So, I want to encourage you to set aside a time, every day, to do some kind of centering exercise. Spend time in prayer, or do some kind of meditation, or perhaps a yoga practice, or a mindfulness exercise. Perhaps read the Bible, or something else, that you find spiritually uplifting. There's no one right way to do this, but find something that works for you. And then set aside some time, daily, to nourish and replenish your spirit.

Another highly-recommended strategy for relieving stress is to spend time outdoors, and spend more time in nature. Walk among the trees. Listen to the birds. Enjoy these gorgeous fall days. You and I are so fortunate to live in a beautiful place with clean air and a wonderful climate. There's nothing like spending time hiking, or biking, or just walking around town.

So. More time outdoors, a daily centering practice, pay less attention to the news. Maybe even massage therapy. These are all good strategies.

Still, for me at least, they are not enough. Truth is, they are not nearly enough. What I really need, in order to keep my spirits up, and keep my stress level manageable, is other people. Specifically, I need to be among people who care about

what's going on the world, and who care about each other, and treat one another with kindness and with respect. The truth is, I need you.

For what feeds my soul like nothing else is to be part of a community of like-minded people, who care deeply about our Mother Earth, and the slow-moving disaster of climate change; I need to be with people who care deeply about our brothers and sisters from Central America who are seeking refuge, for themselves and for their families; and to be with people who care deeply for those who do not have adequate food, or clothing, or shelter.

Yes, there's a lot of stress these days, and it is a hard time to be hopeful. But to me, it makes all the difference to be part of this church, this brave community of open-hearted, open-minded souls, who worship together and who work together to find ways to build justice, and bring hope and healing.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm very clear that this little church on West Spain Street is not utopia: far from it! But however imperfectly we may embody our ideals, still, we are a community of justice and joy - a place of love and hope - where we seek to seek follow the words Ellen read for us earlier, from the second letter of Timothy.

Just as the author of Timothy describes it, we tend to have "itchy ears" these days. People are impatient with sound doctrine; they prefer to listen to what fits their own preconceived notions. Truth is in short supply; instead we "wander away to myths" - also known as fake news. The fact is that all of us, across the political spectrum, tend to listen to media sources which will confirm our own biases and tell us what we want to hear.

But the author of 2nd Timothy urges us – whether the time is favorable or unfavorable - to hold fast, and to continue with utmost patience to proclaim Christ's message of love and hope; and to fully carry out our ministry - to carry out our ministry - by proclaiming the value of every precious human being on this very precious planet.

As you probably know, I am chair of the Stewardship Committee this year. Most of you received an email letter from me a couple of days ago, along with the Goal Budget, which we will discuss after worship today. And next week you will get another letter from me, encouraging you to think carefully and prayerfully about your gift to the church this year.

This is a first for me, being stewardship chair; but, on the other hand, I have been involved in stewardship campaigns for a very long time.

It started way back in the fall of 1971. I was a young seminary student just getting started out, when I was appointed to be the student pastor of a little church in rural Ohio. And that's where - 48 years ago this week – I gave my first sermon. And I still remember that day so clearly, not because of anything I said - but because of my two daughters, who happen to be here with us today in worship: Cyndy and Kristi. And we are so happy to have Cyndy here with us today, from Oregon!

Susan had dressed them that day in cute little dresses with frilly underpants. Now this was a Methodist Church, and so it had a prayer rail on the steps in front of the chancel, where people came forward and knelt to take communion.

So, I was preaching away that day, just getting wound up, when our two little girls somehow got away from Momma. And they were determined to get to their Daddy in the

pulpit. So, in the blink of an eye, there they were - both of them – climbing up over the prayer rail to get to me – frilly underpants and all.

I was mortified. Susan was mortified. And the people in the congregation were: enormously entertained. They absolutely loved it! This was, after all, far interesting than my sermon.

Anyway, it was at that little church I had my first real experience of stewardship. Those people taught me so much about stewardship and generosity. Picture this tiny one-room church, with no running water, no bathroom facilities – except an outhouse in the back. But somehow, people got excited, got hold of a vision, and we launched a building campaign. And we golly, we raised enough money to build, not only bathrooms, but a kitchen and a small community room.

What a grand success it was! People loved their church, and they were surprisingly, amazingly generous.

Now, over the many years since, I've been a part of many, many challenging stewardship campaigns and several building campaigns. And over the years, again and again, I have been amazed by the generosity of church people.

Dear friends, our small-but-mighty church here in Sonoma provides for us; this little community of open minds and open hearts nourishes the soul, and gives us hope in hard times. This church provides us with opportunities to not just sit back and be helpless, but instead to be actively engaged in works of compassion and healing and justice.

Our marvelous pastor and music director and staff, this beautiful sacred space, all of our buildings and property, which have been passed down to us by faithful people through many generations: all of this is a gift to you and to me; a gift that provides so much for us.

Especially in times like these, this church nurtures us, and takes care of us. And we must, in turn, care for the church.

And so, my friends, like Kaiser, I want to encourage you to “take care.” Take time to care for your own spiritual well-being.

Take care of your soul.

And, take care of your church.

So that, together, we may “be well.”

And we may thrive.

For Jesus' sake, Amen.