

Short Staffed

Psalm 23; Hebrews 13:20-21

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The sign read as follows: “We are currently short staffed. We apologize for any inconvenience. Please be kind and patient with the staff that is working.” I came across this sign at a local restaurant earlier this week. It seemed to me to communicate a deeper truth, not just about this particular business, but about our current reality, something like: We’re doing the best we can. We know this isn’t ideal, not for any of us, so, let’s be gentle with one another, please? Maybe it could be paraphrased as: Times are hard, so don’t be a jerk. Somehow this simple sign at a local fast-food eatery felt deeply, profoundly true for our entire world. We’re all feeling less than our best these days. I’ve heard from numerous people how they’ve lost it when something minor didn’t go as planned or found themselves crying in response to a commercial or got inordinately frustrated when they misplaced an insignificant item. Others have told me that no matter how much they sleep they are tired, that everything feels as if they are swimming upstream, that they can’t seem to focus. It seems everyone, everywhere is dealing with more than they ought to have to handle, some exponentially so, so maybe we need some signs to remind us to act accordingly, be kind and patient, exercise copious grace, be lavishly generous with mercy and forbearance.

When I read that sign, initially I thought it was sad that we need to be instructed to be kind and patient with those clearly working hard for not a lot of money, but then I wondered, given our current context, maybe we should do more of this kind of honest disclosure.

What if establishments put on their door things like: We are a family-owned business, this is our livelihood, our employees are counting on us and after the past eighteen months we’re barely hanging on.

What if they just told it like it is? Put on the door the reality that their new hire never showed up.

Or that their manager is out caring for a sick child.

Maybe they should post: The supply chain is such that we didn’t get some pretty basic things in the delivery truck. Please don’t get mad at the person working the drive thru when they tell you we’re out of catsup. It isn’t their fault.

If we told it like it is, how ever it is, would we be a little more kind and patient as a result? Would we at least pause before we reacted? Judge less? Question our assumptions more?

What if people put these disclosures front and center? Made it known what they’re dealing with on any given day.

I am trying to help my children with online school while I work full time.

My mother is dying, and I can’t visit her in the nursing home.

I am afraid my marriage is falling apart.

Or –

Sometimes I am overwhelmed with anxiety that I cannot control.

I am lonely and it would mean a lot if someone would think to call me.

I just moved and started a new school and don't yet have any friends.

Some might read:

I must choose between paying my electric bill or getting my prescriptions filled.

Perhaps they'd say:

Today is my 10th day sober.

Or –

This cane, walker, wheelchair in no way impacts my intelligence.

Or –

I am in chronic pain.

Or –

My anger masks deep hurt.

If you were brave enough to tell it like it is, how ever it is: What would your sign say today? What about those closest to you? The cashier? Your neighbor? That person walking their dog or sitting in the pew a few rows in front of you?

I suspect we're all feeling the equivalent of short staffed, scrambling to do what's needed with not enough resources to get the job done in the way we wish we could do it.

When I shared with Grant the sign posted at that local restaurant, he said he'd seen a similar one that read: The whole world is short staffed right now. Be kind to those who do show up.

My friends, we shouldn't underestimate the important power of showing up. Showing up matters. Being present with and for each other, even when we aren't at our best, makes a difference. Offering in faith whatever we've got in any given moment matters. Showing up and being honest with ourselves, with others, taking the risk of saying, "I recognize this isn't ideal." "I know this may be frustrating." "It is really hard right now" "I need some help" allows all of us to be a more open and vulnerable, too. It means we can stop exerting the tremendous energy it takes to pretend that all is well when it clearly is not. It invites us to be kind and patient, with ourselves, and with everyone because we know, at least a little, what they, what we, are facing.

Psalms 23 and this benediction from Hebrews reminds us, as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, God works with what is. Yea though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God is with us. Even in the presence of enemies, God provides for us. The Good Shepherd equips us to do God's will even when we're short staffed. Jesus came to save sinners and calls tax collectors, so we are free to cry out, "Lord, I need your grace and mercy." And that Goodness and mercy follow us *all* the days of our lives, no matter what sign we need to post on the door of our hearts or what prayer we need to whisper in the dark.

The letter to the Hebrews, that is really a sermon, is written to a group of believers described by one scholar as those who “have been under extreme external pressure.” The writer of Hebrews hopes to inspire this small band of battered Christians to rekindle their faith “in the midst of outside pressure and internal fatigue.” (People’s New Testament Commentary)

There is a recognition of their weariness and the weight that they are carrying and that’s why they need this benediction, this good word, that reminds them that the God of peace who brought Jesus Christ from the dead, the very same Jesus who is our great shepherd, whose life, death and resurrection brought us into the eternal covenant that will not let us go, that God, this Savior, will make us complete, enabling us to do God’s will. Right now. Just as things are. Just as we are because we cannot escape the grasp and goodness of the Triune God. We show up. We offer what we’ve got. We lay bare our weaknesses, failures, hopes and hurts. Jesus comes along side us and through the power of the Spirit and the grace of God, mercy and goodness, patience and kindness follows, overflows, and cannot be stopped.

Last Sunday’s service for Dolly affirmed this truth for me. Just shy of 8:30, as I pulled into the church parking lot, I got a call from Anne Albert. I’d been anxious the night before that we’d be deluged with rain on a morning when many would be gathering in our church for a very important and needed service. When I woke up, to my relief the sky looked clear after the tremendous storms of the previous evening. However, Anne’s call informed me that those storms had knocked out power to the church and we had no guarantee we’d have it restored by ten. We made some calls, came up with the best plan we could, got the word out and moved forward.

We posted signs outside the doors. They were short and to the point: We do not have power. There is no livestream. This is no overflow seating. We sent out a message through email and social media along the lines of: We have no power. The service will still happen. It will be hot.

These signs might as well have said: We’re doing the best we can. Be patient and kind. We know this is not optimal, not what we wanted or hoped, but we are going to do all we can under the circumstances. And then we showed up. You all showed up. Everyone came as they were and offered whatever they had to give in a really, really hard moment.

And lo and behold Jesus showed up, too. The Spirit moved. And, frankly, it all felt pretty miraculous. Certainly holy, more than enough, despite all that we didn’t have and couldn’t do. As we worshipped in the dark, the light of the world shone through our collective brokenness. Apparently, the power of God is not dependent upon wires, transformers or circuit breakers, and is evident and life-giving even, especially, in the valley of the shadow of death.

I don’t know what your sign needs to say today, what disclosure or confession or plea you need to make so that others will be compelled to be kind and patient, but God knows what valley you are trudging through. The Good Shepherd knows who among us is lost, injured and afraid and right now is seeking out those most in need of his care. And it is clear that the whole world is short staffed at the moment and we’re all a little frayed, trying to do what needs to be done with fewer resources, emotional or spiritual or material, than would be optimal. Nonetheless, we keep showing up. You showed up today, here or online, just as you are, however you are. And right now, showing up is enough. Really. More than enough because Jesus is here too, working within us, among us, using our vulnerability and our broken places to let his light shine through, the healing, revealing, loving light of the world that cannot be stopped and is all the more visible when we’ve no power and are most in need of it.