

Bishop Smith's reflections—May 10, 2016



Burnout?

Burnout! We've all felt that circumstances, commitments, and expectations of others or of ourselves have converged to the point of exhaustion and apathy. We're even taught now to be on guard for it, to be vigilant in self-care, to beware of the vicious "Protestant work ethic" which we, the enlightened, now see as needless obsession, lest we spiral into burnout. "Love your neighbor as yourself" means you must above all love and care for self.

Burnout is a preventable and embarrassing character weakness of failure to look out for number one. That's what I was taught, and as with most polarities, there's some truth to it when we spin out of control with people-pleasing as our chief yet insatiable goal.

At least once a week someone pulls me aside and says, "You can't keep this pace. You're going to burn out. Slow down, Bishop." Of course, in a sense, they're right. I'm newish still, and I'm beginning to discern enough of the things vying for my attention that I'm starting to form and pursue priorities. Nearly every request coming at me is somebody's top priority, and obviously I can't respond to them all.

But what if I told you I don't think burnout actually exists—at least not in the sense I most often hear it talked about? A wise mentor of mine once shared with a group of pastors that burnout does not equal "being busy." "Burnout," he asserted, "is being busy with things that don't matter." Once again we are faced with a matter of priorities of a first-commandment nature. "You shall have no other gods before me." That's not to suggest that other realities are not very important or even noble or needful. The commandment is about God first. It's about distinguishing and choosing the essential over the merely important. In my previous parish, we often raised the "highest and best use" question for money and people and time.

Luther implied more than once that the busier you get, the more time you need to set aside in prayer, lest you become a reactionary slave to ceaseless demands. Prayer, both listening to and talking to God, is a critical part of the discernment of what matters and thus of avoiding burnout.

Father Francis Lonsway, a Franciscan, reminded me 25 years ago when he helped manage Hickory's Catholic Conference Center that "there's not a soul on this earth any busier than he or she chooses to be. You may not like the consequences and choose to be busy in order to avoid them, but ultimately it's your choice." To me, that's not the law of decision theology; that's Gospel grace! Balance is key. Sabbath is necessary and commanded, not suggested, but being busy in between those Sabbaths with things that matter is a wondrous blessing as well.

May you find your sweet spot balance of work and rest, and may your work be meaningful, and if it's not, may you find other work!

In Christ,

Bishop Timothy Smith



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