

"Whatever the Hardship, Keep Rising Up!"

Based on Brian McLaren's *We Make the Road by Walking, Chapter 39*

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Texts: Isaiah 40: 27-31; 2 Corinthians 6: 1-10; 11:30; Acts 9: 1-25

I had this idea that I would contact the Gaylord High School track coach and borrow several hurdles that we could put down the center aisle and see if you and I could clear them. Lord knows this has been a year of hurdles, maybe not the track kind for most of us. We've encountered the hurdle of Covid-19, and while it looks like we're nearing the end, we know it's not quite over. We worried about toilet paper shortages, lumber prices and now gas issues (mostly out east).

We've hurdled over mask mandates and political posturing. Sometimes, sadly, we've hurdled over one another not taking into account that what we do has an immediate and possibly deadly effect on those around us. Those are just some of the things I came up with that we've hurdled over the past year as a society. But there have been personal hurdles as well. Some of you have dealt with cancer, auto-immune diseases, sick parents and sick kids, school in person and not in person, hybrid education, zoom meetings, racial strife, hate crimes... Help me name some more (congregation offering ideas). And those ideas are just in the

past 15 months or so. What about the rest of your life? How many other hurdles have you cleared in your lifetime?

The truth is that life is not easy. Pandemics or not, economic hardships or not, there seems to always be something that we individually or collectively are called to hurdle. In fact, it's always been true. Humanity has dealt with hardship throughout history., Brian McLaren begins this chapter in our book study this way:

Over thirty years have passed since Jesus launched this uprising of faith, hope and love in our world. Over a dozen years have passed since we traveled with Paul around the Mediterranean. Since then, the uprising has continued to spread. New leaders have arisen. People around the empire have joined us. We know the movement is gaining strength.

It is gaining strength largely because of the hardships we have faced. There have been persecutions from outsiders, betrayals by insiders, and stupid arguments that wasted time and drained our energy. There have been divisions, moral scandals, financial improprieties, all kinds of crazy teachings that confuse and distract, power struggles, sad things that in many ways show how easy it is to forget what this whole movement is supposed to be about. As we've offended each other and forgiven each other, as we've experienced rifts and then reconciliations, we've learned that God doesn't give us shortcuts around hardships, but strengthens us through them.

Let's hear that last sentence again, "God doesn't give us shortcuts around hardships, but strengthens us through them." Keep that in your heart and mind as it is the whole point of this morning's message.

We're good at finding hardships. They are everywhere. We're in month 15 of a global pandemic that has good news one minute and bad news the next. The number of people being infected is less, but it is still occurring. More people are dying, even though it is at a lesser rate. Meanwhile, we argue about what reopening means in the church, in our community, in our state, in our nation and in the world. We use words like safe, safer, and safest to ascertain what level of risk we are able to withstand. And the hardship hasn't only been physical and political, the hardship has been mental as well. Our mental health has suffered greatly during the pandemic, and many are rightfully concerned that there will be a society-wide experience of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) following the pandemic. All week I have been in educational sessions called "the Courageous Church" that is all about how to be the church in today's world. To tell you all of what I have learned would take a week, but I have learned a great deal about resilience and hope amid great suffering and sadness.

Meanwhile, I participated in a national United Church of Christ conversation related to Covid-19 and reopening practices, and a Michigan Conference conversation about our conference-wide transition into a future we're not too sure about. And through it all it was repeated over and over again that for the first time in American history, less than 50% of Americans are

associated with **any** church. Bad news. Another hurdle. Not only in society, but in the church, we have hurdles to overcome. No wonder we're depressed, demoralized, and discouraged. There is so much to do. One person even noted that churches like ours might be the "last stop on the way out the door" for an increasing number of people.

And yet...if McLaren is right (and he has much of the Bible to back him up), then even though we know God did not cause these things, and God does not give us a shortcut through them. These times can depress, destroy, or discourage us. But what if they strengthen us? Every presenter in the Courageous Church seminar told a story of what they were able to do that they always thought about but never accomplished until forced by the pandemic. What about us? What about our own church and our livestreaming of worship? Maybe we wanted to do this for a long time, I don't know, but the crisis of the pandemic made it happen sooner, I believe. What new connections were made through the pandemic that we otherwise would not have had?

Perhaps the best presenter over this past week was fellow UCC colleague, Bishop Yvette Flunder. She lives in San Francisco and of course deals frequently with earthquakes. She likened this past 15 months to an earthquake. Not just the

pandemic, but all kinds of things like we've mentioned. She said that in an earthquake the first things that fall are the facades. If you've got a good foundation than it will stand. It will sway and it will move. The façade will fall. She says at this point in history, she believes the church is going back to the framework of our faith. That's where we see God. Also, the temple in those days was portable. If we are the temple, we too are portable. She asked some good questions that I think are good for us. Why do we go to church? Why do we do what we do? Is what we're doing helping anybody? Where and how do our institutions help our world? Cameron Trimble, the facilitator for the event, responded, "There is a poverty of innovation in our institutions."

Think about the hurdles you've overcome personally and collectively in this congregation. Not just recently, but throughout your life. I'm quite confident in saying that to overcome them you needed innovation. What you always have done likely didn't work, or it didn't work without partnering with innovation. Bishop Flunder went on to explain that this is a Lazarus moment. Sometimes we forget in the Lazarus story that Jesus called him forth, but it took those in attendance to carry out Jesus' command to "unbind him"! We are called to unbind one another. We are called to make a bigger tent. To set out more chairs. As much as it is a hurdle that now less than 50% of the US population is in any

church, according to another poll 80% of Americans who are young still look to the church for spiritual connection.

I feel a little like I'm wandering today, maybe making the road by walking it, but I see a time that could be dangerous for the church, or it could be an opportunity. We've had a rough year, but we have all innovated in some, or many ways, to make it through. We're not done with hurdles, rough times, and hardship. But God will lead us through these times. But to be in touch with the Spirit is going, we need to get our own spiritual house in order. We need more than our weekly worship encounter with God. We need prayer, study, discernment, conversation, partnership, and community to make our way forward. "Inflexibility is what calls to and for reformation. The wind of the Spirit blows through and the least capable become the most capable and vice versa", says Bishop Flunder. We are going to need community. No one can do this alone. Everyone in the world is affected by everything that happens anywhere in the world. The only way forward is together, grounded in authentic, hopeful spirituality. Next week we begin to see where the Spirit will lead. You are invited. You are encouraged. You are gifted. We all are. We have overcome a hurdle we've never seen, and we can model for a desperate world what it means to keep

rising up, whatever the hurdles. No one can sit on the sidelines. Certainly not now.

We have grief work to do for a horrendous time we are still in the midst of. Grounded in our grief, we reach for new opportunities, new solutions, new hope, and more than any other institution in the world, we reach out with joy in a hurting world. Authentic, real, honest, battle-scarred joy in service to all the people of the world...everyone...for all belong to God.

Let us fiercely love them. In the many blessed names of God. Amen.

