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Have you ever sat in a “time-out” chair? Some may view it as not a very good place to have to sit, for children often associate the chair with inappropriate behaviors. I taught Head Start almost 40 years ago, and when a child got out of control and became a danger to other children, we would ask the child to sit in the “time-out” chair in order to get away from the conflictual situation and to calm down. It wasn’t a place of punishment, but a place to gather oneself together, to regroup, to calm down in order to enter back into the day’s activities with a clear head.

I wish we all had time-out chairs, places we could go when the day seems overwhelming, when the pressures of life seem overbearing. Maybe the world would be a little bit less violent if everyone would sit for a while before acting out of anger or revenge.

Have you ever had an overwhelming day, when your burdens seemed too great to carry? I’m sure we have all had those days, and the Gospel of Mark tells us about numerous conversations Jesus had with his disciples about very difficult topics, such as

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temptations to sin, marriages that fall apart, the fact that riches could not save them from struggles, and that Jesus would eventually be captured and killed. Finally, Peter got so frustrated by these talks that he said, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” I imagine Peter thinking, *If we’ve left everything for you, can’t you promise that our lives will go easier?* Instead, Jesus kept referring to persecutions, and then he explained that the first will be last and the last will be first. It all seems so upside-down and backwards, doesn’t it?

I think Jesus was just trying to paint a realistic picture of life. He could have used lots of bright and cheery colors, but then most of us would have wondered why life wasn’t always bright and beautiful. Although we do have colorful days, sometimes our weeks are filled with the dreary and gray colors of day-to-day struggles.

That’s when Jesus’ words in Matthew’s Gospel give us courage, reminding us that we’re not alone, for he told his followers: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you...and you will

*Matthew 11:28-30; Mark 10:28-31*

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find rest for your souls.” Translations often then say, “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light,” but that isn’t the most accurate translation. A yoke was placed on oxen to help them pull a plow in the fields, and a better translation of the word often translated as “easy” is “well-fitting,” meaning the yoke fits well around the oxen, making it easier to pull the plow.

Sometimes we get the mistaken idea that our yokes or our burdens are supposed to be easy, but when life gets difficult—as it does for all of us—we wonder why we struggle. Understanding your yoke as “well-fitting” means your burden fits well with who you are. It also means you have the strength to carry your load, for Jesus reminds us that even when carrying heavy burdens, he will give us rest. It’s like having a time-out chair, a place to rest on those heavy days when life seems to be falling apart.

There’s one thing I’ve noticed about carrying heavy burdens—the heavier they are, the slower the pace to carry them. It’s hard to run carrying a large load of items, and in a similar way, when our lives

become burdened, we may need to slow down and take a bit longer to sort through the issues.

Slowing down can be a good thing to do, and during the next six weeks of Lent as we prepare for Easter, we can practice slowing down in the midst of our busy lives, taking a pause to reflect just a bit longer, to find the right tempo. If you need an idea of something to do during Lent, look at the calendar of ideas created by some of you. Find the right tempo, pause, and try something different.

This hourglass reminds us that the sands of time are always moving at the same pace, no matter how fast we think we have to go. I can’t make the sand move any faster or slower, for it falls at the right tempo. Maybe we each need a falling stream of sand to remind us to take our time, to wait, to pause and sense the Spirit’s movement in our lives.

It may feel awkward to slow down and pause, for we’ve been conditioned to think that faster is better, working hard brings rewards, and we may feel a bit guilty for what feels like goofing off.

There's a story about St. Anthony, a Portuguese Catholic priest of the Franciscan Order who lived eight centuries ago.

Once the great St. Anthony was relaxing with his disciples outside his hut when a hunter came by. The hunter was surprised and mildly shocked and rebuked Anthony for taking it easy. It was not *his* idea of what a monk should be doing. But Anthony said, "Bend your bow and shoot an arrow." And the hunter did so. "Bend it again and shoot another," said Anthony. And the hunter did, again and again.

The hunter finally said, "Abba Anthony, if I keep my bow always stretched, it will break."

"So it is with the monk," replied Anthony. "If we push ourselves beyond measure, we will break; it is right from time to time to relax our efforts."<sup>1</sup>

We have so many distractions in our lives that tempt us to keep our bow always stretched. Have you ever noticed how many things can take your attention away from being quiet, from resting? Televisions. Radios. To-do lists. Facebook. Email. Bills to pay. Meetings to attend. Shopping. And smart phones.

How many times do you check your phone each day? A study a little over a year ago suggested we check our phones 52 times a day.<sup>2</sup> I discovered one can even download an app to track phone usage, so I decided to try it. During February I used my phone an average of 1.5 hours a day, which is less than the 3-4 hours that studies suggest is the average time on our phones.<sup>3</sup> I learned that 31% of my time was talking on the phone. 15% of my time was searching online with Google or Chrome, 7% on Amazon, 6% Gmail, with the remaining 43% doing other tasks.

Recently, I remember sitting in a restaurant with a group of church folks, and as we were chatting with one another, I happened to notice two couples sitting in a booth across from us. They were silent, except for an occasional sound of laughter, as all four of them were gazing into their phones. Maybe they were chatting together online, or maybe they were each in their own worlds, but I thought it was an odd way to spend an afternoon eating together.

Next weekend provides an opportunity to recognize our connection to our smartphones with

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the annual National Day of Unplugging, from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown. The website for this event suggests that “We increasingly miss out on the important moments of our lives as we pass the hours with our noses buried in our devices,” so they invite us to join “a 24-hour global respite from technology. It highlights the value of disconnecting from digital devices to connect with ourselves, our loved ones and our communities in real time.”<sup>4</sup>

I recently saw a comic where several children were sitting on the floor around their grandfather seated in a chair. They asked, “Grandpa, tell us what life was like before everyone had a smartphone.”

The next frame focuses on the grandfather, sitting in his chair replying, “Well, kids. It was a much simpler time. Whether at home, work, the park, on the bus, or on the train, people conversed with one another happily.”

“We put time and energy into building lasting relationships with those we called friends.”

“We let our minds wander and imaginations roam free. We were content just to be.”

The final frame of the comic strip shows the grandfather looking at his grandchildren, who were all sitting on the floor playing games on their smartphones.<sup>5</sup>

Is it really possible give up our phones for 24 hours? Who’s willing to try it? I think I just might give it a try as one spiritual practice during Lent. So, if you call me next Friday evening or Saturday, you can check to see if I answer the phone, but since I may be sitting in my time-out chair, I may not answer the phone. May you find ways to slow down the next six weeks and notice God’s presence.

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<sup>1</sup> William Bausch, *Storytelling: Imagination and Faith*, p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> <https://variety.com/2018/digital/news/smartphone-addiction-study-check-phones-52-times-daily-1203028454/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/1/6/21048116/tech-companies-time-well-spent-mobile-phone-usage-data>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nationaldayofunplugging.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ba-bamail.com/content.aspx?emailid=25766>