

As most of you know, I spent the majority of last spring wearing a hat I never anticipated wearing as a pastor. Last spring I went from just being Pastor Tina to Coach Pastor Tina or Coach Pasta, which my girls decided was less of a mouthful and way more fun to say. Girls on the Run brought life lessons not only to our girls, but also to *me* that will have a lifelong impact. There are things I *try* to go back to because they're helpful, tools that can be utilized to make life a little smoother.

One such lesson for me was our session called Stop and Take a BrThRR. It was a lesson with a multifaceted goal. On the one hand, we wanted to teach our girls to slow down—they are pulled in so many different directions, we wanted to show them that it's ok to take a break, to stop, to pause, to breathe and give yourself space. On the other hand, we also wanted to teach our girls that it wasn't always the best choice acting upon your first gut instinct and reaction. In order to engrain this into *all* of our minds, we learned a five step process. When you're in a situation that is stressful or you don't know what to do remind yourself to stop and take a breather and follow your steps.

The first one is of course, stop. Just pause. If you're in conversation with someone, ask for a timeout, just a little bit of space. Honestly, for me, the first step is the hardest, because once I'm in a situation, especially if my

anxiety brain is going, it is near impossible to get my brain to remember to stop. So stop, then breathe. Big deep breaths, in through your nose, out through your mouth. Do whatever you need to do to chill out your heart rate and your emotions and just breathe. Once you've done that, now you can think. You've given your brain time to get out of fight or flight mode. Think about how you want to respond or act in the situation, give yourself a process, steps to follow. Then once you've done all of that, stopped, breathed, and thought, *then* dive back in, respond to the situation, resume the conversation, get back into the group you paused from, put your thoughts in to practice. Then once it's all done, gently review it with yourself. How did your response work? What could you do differently?

It sounds great in theory, right? Well, let me tell you, a couple of practices later, I attempted to put this into action when two of our girls got into an argument and *Lord*. There was no stopping, there was no breathing. Even once I got them to do that, the instinct was, yes I have stopped and breathed but *she is still annoying me!!!!* There were so many tears and so much frustration and as a coach, I felt like I had failed my girls in getting them through it to the point that once practice was over I had to do my own stop and take a breather regimen to figure out what could have gone better. Watching them, mere weeks after we had just learned this skill and how

helpful it could be, still relying on their instinct to just be *done* with each other, I realized how necessary our five step process was. They were ready and raring to write each other off, and we still had *weeks* left in the season. We had to stop and breath to see a way forward, and as I thought about the lessons this week, I realized that Jesus would have been an excellent Girls on the Run coach, because he had these five steps down well before us.

Now let's just get a few things out of the way here. It's important for us to remember that when Jesus came on the scene, he didn't have any intention of starting a new religion, he wanted to reinvigorate and refocus the Jewish community that he grew up in, to get them back to center, to where the Word of God was calling them. With that in mind, we always have to exercise a little perspective when it comes to texts like these. "The church" wasn't a thing when Jesus was operating, but by the time the gospels were written it was, so there's every possibility that the gospel writers were taking things that Jesus had said about community or about fellowship and they're adapting them to their new life as a church. It's just good to hold that in tension, because this is one of those passages where people want to say, but Jesus said! Well, yes, he probably said a lot of things about how we operate together, and holding them all in perspective is good. By the time Matthew's gospel was written, the church was a big

enough community that yes, they had to take into consideration the lessons Jesus gave them and apply them to a new situation, how do we function together now that we're a known entity? How do we deal with conflict? How do we stop and take a breather when our siblings have just really, really ticked us off? And into those spaces come words from Jesus.

Jesus' advice reads like a Girls on the Run lesson plan. In the event of conflict, step one, take it up one on one, talk it out, try to find resolution together. If that doesn't work, step two, bring a couple of others into the conversation for mediation and to be witnesses. If that still doesn't work, step three, take it to the whole group, address it as a community. And if that still doesn't work, step four, treat that person as you would a Gentile or a tax collector. And *that* is where our human ideas come into conflict with Jesus' stop and take a breather plan.

We read that last step and we want to be like oh yeah, Jesus totally gives us permission to block, unfriend, write off, cancel, choose your exclusionary verb of the day, anyone that we have tried to cooperate and failed with. He says it right there! If you tried, well then, treat them as a Gentile or a tax collector, bye Felicia, we're done. Except...hold on...how did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? Well, a couple of weeks ago we saw Jesus' ministry get totally turned upside down by an interaction with a

Gentile woman which made him realize that his mission was for *all* of God's children, Gentiles included. And we're reading from a gospel that was named after the tax collector disciple whom Jesus called to be one of the 12, a gospel that bears his influence as one whom society wrote off as a sinner, the lowest of the low and whom Jesus said, come and follow me. So...we're to treat them as you would a Gentile or a tax collector...which means...dang it...we still gotta love them. They're still part of the team, and we have a long season ahead of us. Humph.

The key to all of this is how Jesus ends this conversation, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." In our most heated of arguments, our most frustrated of moments, if we are with another person, Jesus is there. And if Jesus is there...there is a chance to breathe, to remember who we are, and to find some ounce of love and respect. Now, this is not to say that there are not instances where harm is so egregious that there is no choice but to say peace out, we're done here. If the baseline for all we are to do and say amongst one another is love, well there are certainly behaviors that are so contrary to love that there is no going back. However, it is possible to keep one's distance from someone, part ways, take an extended breather and still treat them with decency and respect. And that's where we fall so short of the mark.

We want to read this text as Jesus giving us permission to participate in cancel culture. I tried Jesus, but they didn't listen and *you said* we can get rid of them. That's not what Jesus is saying...by saying treat them as a tax collector or a Gentile, he means treat them as someone who is still a part of the kingdom of God, who is still loved by God, made in God's image. It doesn't mean that you have to be in buddy buddy relationship with them, but you can acknowledge that they're a person. We tend to jump so far afield from this it isn't even funny. If we're in conflict with someone, well then, they're dead to us, we are not going to speak of them, we're not going to acknowledge them, we're done...and yet someone we still proclaim that we're called to love one another as God loves us.

I have so often experienced people saying that there is no fight like a church fight. I've seen them, I've been in them myself, and it is woefully true, and what does that say about us? That of all people, we're the ones who are willing and able to go to the mat about, more often than not, the most trivial of things, and it doesn't matter how long we've been in relationship with one another, we sever that cord so fast there wasn't time to stop and think, let alone breathe. And yet, we want people to come and find a home, a safe space, a place of welcome among us? When sometimes we can't even keep our own petty arguments from ripping apart decades of

relationship? We want so desperately want this gospel to justify our actions, but we do not want to consider how it holds a mirror up to our own faults, foibles, and failures when it comes to our relationships with one another.

If the church has any way forward, we have to first look at how we operate together. Are we actually people of love or are we people that will tear into each other when we think an agenda item is wrong? Are we actually people who respect one another or are we people that pretend to be nice and then snipe behind one another's backs? Are we actually a community of faith or are we people who are in this together until someone ticks us off and then we're out? Genuine, loving, safe faith communities take work and effort and care. They require hard conversations and moments of grace. They take time to listen and respect one another, to give each other space to stop and take a breather. If we want this gospel to give us the go ahead to ignore someone, then we're looking in the wrong place, but if we want this gospel to give us genuine steps for how we can better love and care for one another, for how we can better our relationships with one another, well then we're in the right place. We're going to argue and bicker, we're human, but how we deal with those moments will speak to who we are as people of faith. Will we say nope, we're out of here or will we stop...take a breather...and remember, Jesus is here? **AMEN!!!**