

In 1879, 11 year old James Connelly left school to start a life of factory work. The conditions were terrible, the British taxes were impossible to pay, there was a complete lack of social systems, and the Irish were dying, desperate, and degraded. Connelly joined union organizers, making the case for strikes and the need for better working conditions. He was tireless in his commitment. When striking wasn't enough, he turned to forming the Irish Socialist Republican Party. The harder the British tried to bust the unions and break up the organizing power of the socialists, the louder and more creative Connelly became. In 1913, under extreme duress, Connelly organized a major walk out. By then, he and the Irish men and women who he had come to represent, had nothing left to lose. They had endured, and endured, waiting and working for the day when the Brits would be forced to share power, when enough Irishmen would have enough wealth and clout to change the circumstances for their country folk. The day, it seemed, was never coming. There was nothing to look forward to but a life of endurance – for themselves, their children, on and on. In that bleak and broken place, The Irish Citizen Army was formed. Three years later in 1916, the Easter Rising would bring out the biggest show of collective Irish outrage and action in modern history. The endless drudgery of life under British rule was not to be endured any longer. But the privation of war seemed worth bearing because there was a hope of liberation at the end.

But, God only gives you what you can handle. As if enduring, for it's own sake, is somehow holy. Salvific. But to what end?

Here – hold this 50 pound sack. Just hang on to it.

Til when?

Oh, I have no idea.

Isn't someone coming for it?

I don't think so, no.

But when can I put it down?

Whatever do you mean, put it down? My dear! You are enduring, and God smiles upon you!

Um. My back hurts. And I don't even know what's in here? Who cares about it anyway?

Irrelevant, good and faithful servant! Endure, and be thankful that God sees fit to share this with you!

I don't know about you, but I'm not buying it. Not at any price. If I am enduring for a time, so that something wonderful may be revealed or brought about, sure. I will grit my teeth and bear it like no bodies business. Because the it isn't really about the endurance. It is about the vision, the good thing on the other side of the endurance.

Endurance and unity have an interesting relationship. We think of unity as a coming together in which everyone is content with the arrangement. And if that were the case, unity would be an unequivocal good. Of course, that is easy for those who are content with the terms to say, isn't it? Paul's nice words of unity, are at least a little, I think a lot, tinged with endurance. Because Paul isn't actually very concerned with the contentment of all. Rather than change what is working for some, Paul expects everyone else to endure.

Unity, as we practice it, costs, and is charged on a sliding scale. Those who need unity most and have it least pay dearly. And those who have what passes for unity and haven't really needed to rely upon it, they get more for free. Paul misses this. Of course he misses it. Even in his transition to apostle and his

rejection of the standing orders to persecute the Christians, Paul still remains a Roman citizen. He still has the resources to travel. Because of his access, he knows people all over the Roman world, he has places to stay, and when he mouths off, he usually has someone to speak for him, or at least his status to do so. Paul doesn't endure. He hands other people big bags to hold and tells them to endure while he heads off to the next town.

So, when Paul is telling the people of Corinth to just be unified, I am certain he doesn't realize what he may be asking. It may be that the differences between the members of the community are just petty quarrels. Maybe. Or maybe not. It seems to me at least as likely that there were real differences – of theological understanding, of resources and life experience, of need and trauma. In which case, merrily telling everyone to be unified is telling some to endure. Endure being hurt, disregarded and violated by the very community they have come to as a means of escaping those things. In which case, is it just, fair, or right for Paul to tell everyone, across the board, to just be unified?

I don't think so. I think it is a way of overlooking and excusing the terrible actions of the system and the apathy of the most comfortable members of society.

Endurance and the false unity that compels it, reaches a breaking point. It never fails – people get fed up. When the senselessness, the useless futility of their endurance are no longer avoidable, the game is over. Standing Rock in Dakota. Arab Spring. Yellow Vests in Paris. The Red Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. The Founding Fathers. The Protestant Reformation. Liberationist Methodists. Eventually, there comes a breaking point at which enduring a

togetherness that is called unity but feels more like emotional, spiritual, and communal suicide can go no farther.

Jesus' breaking point, the moment at which he comes into his own and embraces, if with some bitter reluctance, his role, is John's murder. When he hears what has happened to his cousin, his teacher, his friend, he leaves the seclusion of Nazareth and goes to the city of Capernaum. When we hear that Jesus is calling for repentance, he isn't suggesting that people be nicer to each other. Matthew, in referring to the prophet, reminds us that the people who sat in darkness were being given a great light. Those who sat in the shadow of death, have seen the light. This isn't a figurative thing for Jesus. Especially not in that moment. He sat in the shadow of John's death: John, who died trying to get his people to free themselves from Roman rule. Jesus, refusing to have John's death be in vain, takes up his ministry in earnest and challenges people to decide for themselves if this is their breaking point, and if it is not, what will it be?

Repentance is specifically asking Jews in power, the ones who make the plans for everyone and expect to be followed, assume that all will be unified behind them, or else, to think about what price their calls for unity are costing others.

And once Jesus goes public, once he stops calling endurance unity in an effort to try to keep the pitiful excuse for peace, he is immediately surrounded by followers. Immediately, they followed him, leaving everything else behind. It isn't so hard to leave everything behind when there isn't much there in the first place.

We are surrounded by calls to be unified: as a church, a nation, unified with family. All of these call us to support institutions, and they ask us to do that before, maybe instead of, asking if those institutions are worthy of our efforts at

unity. And that is a recipe for endurance. True unity will require that everyone make a little room, get a little uncomfortable, give something up to gain much more. But true unity does not mean that some just suck it up and endure so that others can go about their merry way saying how wonderful it is that we are all together.

We are surrounded by calls to be unified and we are surrounded by people who are at or very near their breaking points. Maybe you are one of them. If so, I want to invite you to follow Jesus, and send a postcard to Paul. Jesus says that the *peacemakers* are blessed. Not those who endure all manner of nonsense from here to eternity. We are called to make peace. We are called to endure the trials and tribulations of the construction period, not because endurance is sacred but because the act of creating is. We are called to seek a Christian unity. A true unity.

What is your breaking point? In whatever venue you are struggling to maintain your place in the unity, wherever it is you feel that what is preached is not practiced, what will it take for you to ask why, exactly it is that you are supposed to stand and hold an unbearable burden for the sake of those with carefree and empty hands?

When we make an idol of unity, we must ask ourselves who suffers first and worst? If we are having a hard time seeing, it is probably because we have not had to look before, which should give us pause. And rest assured, just because some suffer first and worst, does not mean that the suffering will not come to you, too.

The bleak midwinter reveals all the weak branches in the trees. And it reveals all the likely breaking points in our calls for unity. Without all the foliage and the flowery words of unity, the branches look bare. And then and only then

you know where to prune. Where best to disrupt so that something new can grow.

James Connelly died. It would be easy to conclude that his bid for a new thing instead of the status quo of unity failed. However, look at Ireland now. After the uprisings, and the troubles, the dark days, Ireland is now the bridge that keeps Brexit from being devastating.

Find your breaking point. Repent of enduring for its own sake. And go through the bleak time to the true flourishing of a unity that is not coercive and corrosive but creative and collective.

Amen.