

Trinity Presbyterian Church, Ottawa

“I’ve been meaning to ask...What do you need?”

Sunday, August 22, 2021

I’ve been meaning to ask...what do you need? As we begin to think about this question, I want you to ask yourself if you would know what your answer would be, if a dear friend or a loved one came to you and asked it genuinely? I know for myself, I am much more comfortable caring for and helping others. I am much less willing and able to let others help me. When I read the story of Jesus with Mary and Martha, in which Martha is busily working in the kitchen, making sure everything is just right, making sure her guest has everything that he needs, making sure she is being the very best hostess, and Mary is just sitting at Jesus’ feet in conversation, I know very clearly that I am almost always a Martha in my life, and that is certainly my comfort zone. And when Jesus rebukes Martha and praises Mary for her attentive presence, I can’t help but bristle with a little resentment. But there is an important lesson here, for each one of us. Jesus calls us to be the host and also the guest, to care for others and to also be cared for, to speak and lead and also to listen and follow, to teach and also to learn. So, as we think about what we need, I invite you to really wonder...what do you really need and yearn for? Many of us have not ever wanted for physical needs-for food, housing, clothing and things like that. We are the ones who GIVE, after all, who donate, who volunteer, who help others, those people those less fortunate than us. Of course, that dynamic makes times of physical need even harder to admit-it’s “them, other people” who need things, not us. But surely there have been times in our lives in which we have desperately needed help-not just emotional, but also in tangible, physical ways. And in order to live into a world of true abundance and justice, we need to recognize that-no matter how comfortable, educated, wealthy, self-sufficient we think we are, we need others. And we must welcome their help, their support, their wisdom, their guidance, and their comfort, with humility and graciousness. God’s creation is one in which every single person, no matter

their education, their wealth, their nationality, their race, their ability, has something valuable to give. And Jesus models time and time again that even he, the Son of God, was able to sit down and receive from the generosity of others. We would do well to practice this mutuality in our own societies too and it would enrich us all and help remove those harmful labels of us and them, rich and poor, capable and incapable. And not only would it enrich us and show us that all people have something worthy to give, it would be doing the will of God if we practiced this too.

This week's question recognizes that we all have needs and that we need each other. It reminds us that we each have unique needs and that we cannot assume to know what is best for others if we haven't asked. This question also prompts us to reflect on our own needs, priorities, and desires, which can sometimes be difficult to discern from one situation to the next. In the midst of Job's afflictions, three of his friends promptly leave their homes and come to him. They tear their garments, weep loudly, and sit with him for seven days, saying nothing. Their response is the ministry of presence, of true solidarity, of seeing Job's excruciating pain and joining him there in the midst of it. Beaten and imprisoned, Paul writes to Timothy with a simple request: "Come quickly." He lists all those who abandoned him, but says, "I hope that God doesn't hold it against them!" In his greatest moment of need, Paul doesn't need revenge, but instead asks for companionship. In essence, this is what we all need—for someone to come quickly, to gather the items we want, and to simply show up.

In Job, we have a person who has suffered extreme trauma—the trauma of losing his livelihood where his present and future wellbeing are very much in question. In a year of record unemployment and underemployment, financial traumas are all around us. These are very real and impact every aspect of a person's life. A scarcity mindset can creep in, causing every decision to be skewed and suspect, making even the most mundane of daily decisions challenging. Job has also seen his children die a sudden, unexpected death. The loss of a loved one, no matter the circumstances, also impacts us, but the impact can be so much sharper when

it is unexpected and untimely. Job has suffered physical pain and discomfort—pain that must have seeped deep into his bones. This is very real trauma. His friends hear of his traumas and head to see him. They offer solidarity in very specific ways. Initially, they react with the proper level of emotion. They match the amplitude of despair of the situation. They are feeling with Job, and by weeping aloud and tearing their robes are offering Job an outward manifestation that his traumas are indeed very real and worthy of the feelings of the moment. We each have different ways of reacting to trauma and grief. The Reverend Remington Johnson writes that “In the church I was raised in, the parishioners would fill the refrigerator of the one in grief with casseroles. A few folks would descend on a home and clean it top to bottom. It was their way of tearing their clothes and rubbing ashes on themselves.” Later, Job’s friends sit with him for days and witness with their very presence the incredible weight of the trauma. Often, we are able to demonstrate our outrage, surprise, grief, and all the rest when we see someone hurting, but we can miss following that up with tangible signs of solidarity. Job’s friends do this well. They are in it for the long haul.

How can we show up for one another in ways that both explicitly show that we see the pain of the moment and also that we are not afraid to sit with someone in this pain? The Rev. Johnson also writes that “During chaplaincy training at the hospital, one of my supervisors would use the analogy of a person at the bottom of a hole. Our job was not to offer them a rescue line and attempt to pull them out, but to descend into the hole to bear witness to their reality and be with them. This being with one another is incarnational. It is a sacred act.” Every Sunday, we have the opportunity to do this as well. We come together and do this-by celebrating and worshiping, by praying and grieving together. We witness one another’s existence, traumas, needs, and spend time together. Church offers a sacred space and a sacred time that we don’t necessarily get really anywhere else in our lives and world.

While Job asked for nothing, Paul is active. He has requests. He has needs and he is making them known. “What do you need?” This is such a

direct and vulnerable thing to ask. It isn't a limiting question like, "Would you like me to do...such and such for you?" It is open-ended, and when we offer this question to another, we do not know how they will respond. Paul responds with needs, wants, and a desire for justice. The list is long, both in things that Paul wants brought to him and in wrongs he needs to name. When I worked in the hospital as a chaplain, a colleague asked a person who was nearing death, "What do you need?" They answered, "I need to be healed. I need to feel better." She could heal them. None of us can, sometimes not even the doctors and the nurses can either. And I am not sure how we can make them feel better. But, whether as nurses or doctors, chaplains or pastors, friends or family members, we can be with people and offer witness to the desires of their heart, accompanying them in whatever they are going through, again not trying to help or fix or solve, but just to be present.

Paul offers us a moment of intense humility as he opens himself up to share what he needs. The grievances, the stuff—all of it is important, and offering space for folks to respond openly and honestly about what they need is such a sacred act. This isn't some form of paternalism where we quickly judge Paul's needs and make decisions about whether those needs will really serve Paul. We may of course eventually move to a place in the conversation where we talk about what we can and cannot provide, but we must first trust the one we are meeting to know what they need. We can respond to someone's named needs with additions and clarifications, helping them really target the need that caused the specific request to arise, but again, the first step is hearing—fully hearing—what someone's needs are and discerning how we might respond.

I remember visiting my parents with Inez when she was just about six months old. Still in the very fresh stages of new parenthood, I was both very fragile and full of doubts and also very sure of the fact that I knew, deeply and profoundly what my baby needed and was confident that I could provide for her. A friend of my mothers came over to visit one day and was sharing stories of her own new grandchild, born around the same time as Inez. As a

new grandma she also felt very strongly that she knew what her granddaughter needed and also the best way that her daughter and law should be parenting. She had a strong need to be heard, to share her wisdom, to be listened to. But in the midst of her need, she hardly listened to the need of her daughter in law. I remember her going on and on about how she wouldn't be struggling with such and such if she had only done this and that. And how frustrated she was that her daughter in law wouldn't listen to and heed her advice. I remember so very clearly in the moment thinking-and what if you just took a step back and asked her what she needed? How you could help her rather than how you thought she needed to be helped. We have all been there, haven't we? And if we're honest, in various situations we have been the daughter in need of someone asking us-how can we help you, really? And in our not so best moments, we have been the mother-in-law assuming we know what the other needs without even thinking to ask.

So friends, what about you? In this season, what do you need to feel seen and heard? What do you need to feel whole? In what ways has the pandemic changed you? Can I bring you food? Can I bring you some clothes? Can I come help you do laundry, wash dishes, etc.? Can I come sit with you for a while? If someone asked you what you really, really needed, what would you answer? What do you want, prioritize, desire, hope for? And how could the revelation or fulfillment of that need nourish us, change us, and even transform us into healthier and more whole people? Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman writes, "Forgiveness transforms Paul's life. It enables him to seek companionship and comfort instead of vengeance, and it is the essence of the message he carries." Consider the many ways forgiveness has transformed and transfigured Paul throughout his life, especially when he was known as Saul. As his life comes full circle and he is abandoned by friends and persecuted for his beliefs, what does he need? Companionship, not vengeance. So often, we are propelled by our basest, most reactive emotions. But this kind of resolution is often dissatisfying, as it doesn't meet the deeper need. So tell me friends, what is it that you need,

and how can we help you?