

Community Church of Issaquah

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## Are You There for Them?

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When I came to Seattle 40 years ago, I was called to be the pastor of an upstart little church of primarily gay women and men. The church had been started because there were no other churches that were open to allowing gay to attend or become members. It was a place of home for those who wanted to practice their faith but could not find a place to do that. In addition to growing that congregation and serving as their minister, another task that befell me was counselor for victims of the pandemic of HIV/AIDS. Sadly, no other ministers or churches were willing to assist these victims out of fear of contracting that disease. Even when told it was a sexually transmitted, there was not much hope for the women and men who later died from the disease.

In addition to working my full-time job at Boeing and my part-time pastor's position, I spent most of my free time sitting with the victims and planning their funerals. In my first two years here, I officiated at more than 125 funerals. These were the results of funeral homes calling me because there were no other ministers they knew who would do them. Sitting at the bedside of someone suffering from a fatal disease, holding their hand, and often just sitting in silence was my gift to them. The majority of them had been

cut off from their family and had no one to listen or even care.

Here there were patients in special wards of local hospitals alone in a room that even nursing staff or medical assistants did not want to enter. Wearing protective clothing from head to foot, they made it the norm to never touch nor talk too much to the patients. Often, I would just sit, hold a hand, and listen to their very sad stories. Can you imagine how painful it was for one man whose sister called his room but would not speak to him. She asked for me and her only request was that I call her when he died so she could file for his life insurance. This was not uncommon.

From those many, many hours of caring, I learned the importance of simply being present for someone. Yes, it was physically and emotionally tiring for me, but I came to see how vital it is to have someone present in your life in a time of need. I had no power of healing, I could not make things better, I could not mend broken families, I often did not even have words I could say. My gift was to simply be present.

As a minister of over 60 years, I used to think I had to have the exact words for every situation. After all, I was an ordained minister. Didn't they teach me that in seminary? Hadn't I gained that ability in my many years of work with congregations? So, what do ministers think the church pays them for!? It's my job, isn't it? I'm supposed to know everything. But I have learned the hard way that there are plenty of times when throwing out a simple but well-

meaning platitude just does not work. My old standby was that quote from that old Christian know-it-all, the Apostle Paul, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God.” Sounds like the right thing to say, doesn’t it? Take my word for it, as warm as those words are, they don’t mean much in some instances. There are times when there is nothing we can say or do, except to be present for someone.

The Scripture story today about a time when Jesus was called on to heal someone is one of my favorites. It’s touching that Jesus used his healing powers to help someone change his life in ways he had only hope for. That’s beautiful, but there’s a part of the story that means more to me than that healing portion. Here’s a man who is paralyzed and unable to do anything for himself. Sadly, he was in a place where he totally relied on the help of friends. And then what happened? Let me tell you.

Jesus had a reputation for performing miracles and for being a profound teacher about how lives can be changed. Four friends of the paralyzed fellow must have heard about Jesus being nearby and were motivated to take some drastic action for their friend. Putting the paralyzed man on a mat, they carried him to the home where Jesus was teaching and speaking. Imagine their disappointment when there were so many people there that they could not get up the stairs to where Jesus was. The doors were blocked by the crowd. Not being deterred, they came up with another plan. Carrying their friend to the roof, they tore a hole in the ceiling and then lowered him down where he landed at the feet of Jesus. Now the beautiful part of

this parable: When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” And after an exchange or reasons for Jesus healing him, Jesus said to the man, “I tell you, get up, take your mat, and go home.”

Did you get the core of why I love this story? Jesus saw their faith. The faith of the men who were there to support and care for the paralyzed friend. Too often we turn our attention to the healing portion of the passage and overlook the importance even Christ saw in having others there to care and support us. The four friends were present for someone. That’s what I love best of this story. I have an image in my mind of the four men leaping down the stairs and skipping home with their previously paralyzed friend, all rejoicing and thrilled at the new way of life they would have.

I don’t think we engage in the acts of being present with the intent of getting something out of it. Yet, there are always rewards for that kind of deed – some are silent, others are not so. Our reward for being present for someone may be only an inner joy and satisfaction of simply doing the loving thing. The Buddha said, “If you must choose between the right thing and the compassionate thing, always choose the compassionate thing.”

More than 25 years ago, my mother was visiting her aunt in Illinois where she experienced a double aneurism and was rushed to a hospital. Not knowing that she had a personal DNR, she was connected to life support which would not have been her choice. The doctors declared her

brain dead, and my brother, a physician, arranged to have her flown back to Birmingham where she lived. It took our family more than a week to have the hospital take her off of life support. On a sunny Mother's Day Sunday, I went to the hospital just to be there if she were to take her final breath. I sat by her bedside, held her hand and talked softly, knowing she could not hear. She likely did not know I was there, but I knew. And my being present that day when she died was more comfort for me than for her. Being present for someone might often be a gift for self. I was blessed to have been there that day – present for my mother.

A couple of years ago, one of my dear friends was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer. She had just been through the loss of her husband to cancer as well. As she told me, seeing what he went through with his chemo pushed her to make the decision not to engage in that treatment but instead to just have hospice care at home. I'm sure she thought that death would come quickly, but it didn't. Week by week her condition just worsened. She would often say, "Doesn't God know I'm ready to come?" I wanted to do something, to say something that would make her end of life journey better, but I could not make that happen. So, I would go to her home, sit in a chair beside her bed and hold her hand. We seldom spoke but sat there in silence. Eventually she lost consciousness and could not even squeeze my hand to acknowledge my presence.

She had always ended our phone calls or a visit by saying, "I lova, lova, lova ya." On the day of my last visit, I held her hand and repeated those words for her. She died later

than night. It has been a joy to be friends with her and her husband for so many years, and it was heartbreaking to lose both of them so close together. I'm not telling you these sad story to try to enlist your sympathy. The message in this story as the story of the paralyzed man is this: the act of being present for someone is often one of the most rewarding things you can do. It's how we feel Jesus sees our faith.

There's another story from the Gospel of John that has an important message for us as well. In the city of Jerusalem, there are several gates to enter the city. Near the Sheep's Gate there was a pool with five porches called Bethesda. On these porches lay many sick people. Some were blind, some were sick, some couldn't move at all. Tradition said that the first person into the pool when the waters moved would be healed. One day Jesus went by the pool at Bethesda and saw a man lying there on one porch.

Jesus asked him, "Would you like to be healed?" That seemed an unkind thing to say, something like, "Don't you really want to be healed?" Of course, the man did, but there was a problem. The sick man said to Jesus, "Sir, I have no one to put me in the pool when the water is moving. While I am coming, another one gets in first. Jesus's response was to say to him, "Get up! Pick up your bed and walk." Then miracle of miracles, the man was healed, picked up his bed and walked away.

Two healing stories of two men whose encounters with Jesus led to new life. But these two stories are different because of one thing – one man had friends present, the

other man had no one to be present for him. The outcome was the same for both men, yet their stories have had a very deep impact on me and my ministry. I am well aware that there will be many times when I will not know what to say or what to do to bring comfort to a difficult situation. But I can be present for others. How often I could say, “I didn’t do anything. I was just there.” The most assuring and hopeful promise of presence is found in the verses shared this morning from the last words of the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus said to his followers, “Lo, I am with you always, even until the end of time.” That is a presence we can always depend on.

One way each of us can “be there” for others is through prayer. This is one strong way to be present for others here in our CCI family. You might also make a phone call, send a card, or make a visit. There are many ways to be present. Our work is to make it happen. How important it is to hear or to say, “I’m here for you.” It can be life changing.

There is power in one person doing one thing. But if you don’t know the right words to say or the right thing to do, just be present. Be there. That alone can be your gift to the someone – to all of us. You matter. You must never forget that. We count on your being present in our lives and we want to be present in yours.