

Community Church of Issaquah

January 1, 2023

## The Gift of Being Present

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I read a story recently about an automobile accident in which a woman was trapped in her overturned vehicle along a seldom travelled road. A passerby stopped, saw the wrecked vehicle, and called 911 for help. He was told it would be a while before help would arrive. He crawled under the car and began to talk to the woman inside, assuring her that help was on the way. Her plea was made in loud sobs, "Please don't leave me!"

"What can I do? He asked."

"Nothing" she said. "Just stay with me. Don't leave."

He clasped her hand and promised that he would stay right with her until help came. And for two hours he lay there under the car, holding her hand, and gently talking to her. When the paramedics and firefighters finally arrived, they had to cut her out of the car to free her.

The man stayed, holding her hand, until she was loaded into the ambulance and driven away.

When someone asked him about it, all he had to say is, "I didn't do anything. I was just there."

Can you imagine the helplessness of the man at being in such a difficult situation? How without solutions he must have felt, with nothing to say and nothing to do that would change the situation. He was simply present for someone

in a time of need. Perhaps each one of us has been in a situation where just being present meant the world to us. Have you ever been there? In a place where you didn't know exactly what to say or what to do? Why is it that we feel we always must have the right word or the right act before we can fix something or make it right or make someone feel better?

As a minister of over 55 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."

Earlier this year, 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 a phone call 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 this

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. Today we begin our Prayer Partners Program. If you are aware of the need someone has for prayer support, you can complete a Prayer Partner card with their name and details of their request. Take the card home and put it in a place where you will see it often. Each time you do, offer a word of prayer for that individual. This is one strong way to be present for others here in our CCI family. You might also make a phone call, send a Care 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.