

# Caring for One Another

## Responding to Others in Difficult Times: Being Present & Listening



### Opening Questions *(select 1 or 2 questions)*

- Share about a time when someone did something kind or helpful for you.
- How has the pandemic changed how you express care to others?

### What Does the Bible Say?

About the book of Job:

At [EntertheBible.org](http://EntertheBible.org), Daniel Simundson, Luther Seminary Professor Emeritus writes that the book of Job “is not history, but a literally timeless story and a series of enduring dialogues that address theological questions that forever elude simple answers...” “Job is a good and pious man who suffers unbearable tragedies, and he and his friends try to figure out why such disasters should happen to him...” Simundson tells us that “questions about why good people like Job suffer are left unanswered, but Job’s relationship with God is renewed.” In this portion of the text “Job’s friends come to bring comfort to Job, but fail miserably.” Here is the part Job’s friends get right:

*Job 2:11 – 3:2 (The Message)*

Three of Job’s friends heard of all the trouble that had fallen on him. Each traveled from his own country—Eliphaz (EHL-ee-fahz) from Teman, Bildad from Shuhah, Zophar (ZO-far) from Naamath—and went together to Job to keep him company and comfort him. When they first caught sight of him, they couldn’t believe what they saw—they hardly recognized him! They cried out in lament, ripped their robes, and dumped dirt on their heads as a sign of their grief. Then they sat with him on the ground. Seven days and nights they sat there without saying a word. They could see how rotten he felt, how deeply he was suffering.

Then Job broke the silence. He spoke up and cursed his fate.

### Think About... *(optional, depending on time)*

- What are the things that surprise you in this text?
- If Job had been visited by only one friend, instead of three, how would that change the story, if at all?
- What else do you notice as you read this text today?

## **What Do Others Say?**

As a society, in general, we are uncomfortable with suffering. We want to fix it and, if we can't, we want to numb it, pretty it up so it feels easier to bear, or explain it away. This impulse is often well meaning, intended to be an expression of love and care; but sometimes our good intentions have the opposite effect.

I was talking about this with my husband, Andrew, after returning from a conference on *Addiction and Faith*. He shared this story with me:

*When I received my first call to serve as pastor to a small, rural congregation in central Minnesota, I was excited beyond measure. Seminarians often arrive at their first parish filled with idealistic optimism and expectations skewed by the experience of academic life and the sheltered worship life of the seminary. I am not saying that I expected my congregation averaging about 45 worshippers per Sunday to have a pipe organ, a bell choir, and a senior choir accompanied by strings and brass, but I might have thought these things would be nice. So when I arrived to find a church building built to resemble a ranch style house (in case the congregation didn't make it, they thought this would be easier to sell), I began looking for ways that I could enhance and "beautify" the worship experience for those attending.*

*The small hallway that led from the entryway into the sanctuary had a bulletin board for announcements. As I first looked over the board, I found outdated postings, a haphazard arrangement of papers, and, to my dismay, a sad poster of a man struggling with alcohol addiction. Several flyers were pinned next to the poster along with the dates and times of upcoming AA and Al-Anon meetings at the church. I immediately set to the task of beautifying the bulletin board with images of the Church Year calendar. This "beautification" included the removal of everything that referenced addiction or support meetings for recovery.*

*As I think about it now, I wonder how the people who posted those flyers and attended the recovery meetings felt when they saw the "beautified" bulletin board. Did they feel dismissed? Unseen? Frankly, it is difficult for me to look back at my years in the ministry and recognize how often I failed to understand how God wants us to think and act on behalf of those who are suffering. All of the Greek and Hebrew translation, the homiletics, the study of Lutheran Confessions, etc. somehow did not help me to see or understand that God does not call us to approach times of hardship, loss, pain, or misery by trying to "beautify" the situation with platitudes and empty advice. God calls us to be present even as Jesus was present to those in illness, disease, broken histories, and death.*

How many of us look back on how we responded in the face of someone else's suffering or difficult circumstances and wish we would have said or done something differently? How many of us struggle with wanting to have the "right words" or do the "right thing" in the face of someone's suffering or difficulties? How many of us, lacking words and wanting to make sense of the senseless, have quickly turned to what we have heard others say—only to have them fall a bit flat?

Recently I did a funeral for a two-month old baby. That reality is just plain horrible. It is not the way it is supposed to be. Shaking their head, one of the mourners commented to me, "God must have needed another angel in heaven." Frankly, I don't believe that. I don't believe that God needs to take a baby away to make an angel in heaven; but I do believe that in the face of painful life events that defy explanation, the desire to make sense of things is strong. For some of us, we want to explain the hard thing away because—though we may not recognize it in the moment—we suddenly experience an unwelcome sense of our own vulnerability or mortality. If someone else's life goes awry, then ours—or the people we love's—can too.

In the book of Job, Job's friends eventually start pushing back on Job's experience. Even though Job was described as "blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil (Job 1:1 NRSV)," Job's friends challenged him, "Surely, you must have done something to deserve this!" Speaking out of the world view that had shaped their lives to that point, they couldn't make sense of a reality where bad things happened to good people. We can relate to that; but it is important to name that the more Job's friends talked, their words became less and less helpful to Job and eventually were hurtful.

What if we take our cue for how to be with one another in difficult times from Job's friends *before* they started talking? They showed up, saw the impact of his suffering, felt his pain, and sat with him in his grief, holding sacred silence until Job was ready to speak. When Job started speaking, they let him take the lead. They let *him* shape the conversation with what *he* was feeling. It wasn't pretty. Job spoke his truth and cursed his fate. Eventually, Job would get to a place where his relationship with God was renewed and he experienced healing in his life; but to get there he had to feel his pain, mourn his losses, and, over time, make his own sense of things.

It can be so difficult to be present and not speak, to sit in the quiet with someone until they are ready to speak and share what's real. It is holy work. It is a gift of grace that says, "I love you, as you are, in the messiness and uncertainty and the raw emotions." Then, when they are ready to speak, it is a gift to listen—to let their emotions and their reality find voice, however imperfectly, without trying to manage or fix or explain or pretty it up. The gift of listening well is the gift of helping people feel seen and heard and valued. This too is holy and healing work.

*--Reflection written by Jeanne & Andrew Hartfield*

**Think About...** (select one or more questions)

*Note: It is important to recognize that we have all done things that didn't work out as we intended or might not have been the best option. You are still a valuable, loved, caring person. And, we can all learn and discover new and better ways to care for others. Forgive yourself. Forgive others.*

*Listen. Open your heart to new discoveries.*

1. What speaks to you from this reflection today?
2. What does it look like or sound like to simply be present to someone else?
3. What is it about simply being present that is powerful and healing? When has someone else's presence made a difference for you?

4. What are the things that help you to know the best way to be present to someone?
5. What makes it so difficult for us to simply listen or be present?
6. When suffering happens over a long time, it can become difficult to sustain a helpful presence. What have you done to sustain care for someone across time?
7. How are the friends who are a listening presence also blessed by the experience?
8. What reminds you of God's presence and love for you while you are being present for someone else?

### **Prayer**

Come Holy Spirit, Come. Be our teacher and loving friend. Guide us to know who needs our presence. Help us to listen deeply and discern the best way to share your love in each moment. Take away the pulls we feel inside to do things a certain way – a way that might be more about what we need than what another person needs. Thank you, loving God, for all the people who have been present to us on difficult days, ordinary days and brighter days. Help us to be your loving presence for someone today and during this week. Amen.

### **Connecting Faith with Daily Life...**

*(for individual reflection & action)*

- What is something from this reflection and discussion that you want to remember?
- Practice a time of deep listening to someone in your life this week. Focus completely on their words and experiences, without rushing to respond or being distracted by your own thoughts. Allow for silence in the conversation.
- If you are in a time of difficulty, spend some time simply sitting in God's loving presence in silence (set a timer so you can truly relax and focus on God's love and peace). Be kind to yourself and simply set aside any distracting thought that come up. If it is helpful, repeat a word that reminds you of God's love.

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