

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: June 25, 2023 Year A, 4th Sunday after Pentecost

Using “I’ve been Meaning to Ask” resources from *A Sanctified Art* (Week 3 of 4)

Text: Job 2:11-13, 2 Timothy 4:9-18

Title: I’ve Been Meaning to Ask. . . What Do You Need?

Focus: Today’s readings present us with two people in significant need and the response of their friends. Building on last week’s intent to find a better way to respond when people are experiencing pain and loss, we respectfully ask, “What do you need?” In response, we acknowledge the loss and its impact and we display a willingness to listen and be present.

First Reading Job 2:11-13

¹¹Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home — Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. ¹²When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. ¹³They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

Second Reading 2 Timothy 4:9-18

⁹Do your best to come to me soon, ¹⁰for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica; Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. ¹¹Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry. ¹²I have sent Tychicus to Ephesus. ¹³When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. ¹⁴Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will pay him back for his deeds. ¹⁵You also must beware of him, for he strongly opposed our message.

¹⁶At my first defense no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! ¹⁷But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. ¹⁸The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and save me for his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

“What Do You Say to a Friend?”

What do you say to a friend who is hurting? That’s the question that was posed this past week at the Thursday Women’s Bible Study group, where I was a guest. The question continues the conversation from last Sunday, when the theme question was “Where does it hurt?”

Part of the answer for me is that we learn from others. We learn from friends who have experienced pain and loss. That question was posed to another in the group—one

who has experienced a lot of pain as one who has chronic health challenges. Drawing from her experience, she replied

- **You acknowledge the loss** or you acknowledge you see the impact it has on them. “I can see this is painful . . .”
- **You avoid *minimizing*** the loss. The minimizing example she gave from her experience was the use of the phrase, “At least. . .” as in “At least it’s not cancer,” as though this life-changing event for you is no big deal because “. . . at least it’s not cancer.”
- **You are present with them and for them**—just sitting with them can be helpful.

Reminder from Last Week: We All Experience Pain and Loss

We are in week 3 of 4 in this series using resources from *A Sanctified Art*: “I’ve been meaning to ask. . .

- First week: Where are you from?
- Last week: Where does it hurt?
- Today: What do you need?”

Job and Paul are Two People in Need

Today’s scripture readings tell the stories of two people who have likewise experienced some significant loss and are suffering. We can learn from Job and Paul and from how others responded to them in their need.

The first reading is from the book of Job, in the second chapter. The first chapter describes Job’s prior life:

- He is blameless and upright (v. 1).
- He has a wife and 7 sons and 3 daughters (v. 2).
- He was exceptionally wealthy, with sheep, camels, oxen, and donkeys (v. 3).
Things changed rapidly and dramatically:
- Oxen and donkeys were stolen and his servants killed (vv. 13-15).
- His sheep were killed in a fire (v. 16).
- His camels were carried off (v. 17).
- His sons and daughters were killed when a windstorm collapsed the house where they were (v. 19).
- In the opening verses of chapter 2, his health is impacted as he is afflicted with sores all over his body (Job 2:7).

He experiences losses of catastrophic dimension. It is hard to imagine how deep his losses were. As he is in the midst of experiencing all these losses, we come to the 3 verses designated for today, which describe how his friends have responded to him.

- They have heard of his troubles (v. 11).

- They set out from their own homes to be with him. They met together to go and console and comfort him (v. 11).
- His suffering was so great that they did not recognize him (v. 12).
- They wept with him (v. 12); it sounds as though his losses were so overwhelming that they recognized no words could capture what he was experiencing. Instead, they wept aloud, they tore their robes, a physical, visceral response that reflects their sharing in his anguish.
- They threw dust in the air, another physical sign of frustration and maybe a grieving ritual (v. 12).
- Then they sat with him. They stayed with him, accompanying him for the next 7 days (Seven days in the Bible has symbolic weight; in the ancient near East culture, 7 was a number that symbolized completeness or perfection. Recall, for instance, that Genesis describes God creating the heavens and the earth in 7 days).

We talked last week about the impulse we have when witnessing the suffering of a friend. We want to say just the right thing or do something that would take away the pain. That desire to be helpful often leads us to want to “fix things” when that’s just not possible.

Job’s friends recognize the enormity of his loss and pain, and they simply sit with him. They are with him physically and their presence signals a solidarity or a willingness to experience this pain with him. They are “with him” not just physically, but in emotion or spirit as well.

Paul Urges, “Come Quickly”

In the second reading, the Apostle Paul is writing to Timothy. Paul has been a mentor to Timothy; Timothy has been a trusted friend. “Trusted friend” is really an understatement; Paul and he have been like father and son and have been bonded in their common service in the church.

References earlier in the book indicate that Paul is in prison, probably in Rome, as he writes this to Timothy. Paul’s words are weighty because of the suffering that he is enduring and because it’s likely he knows his own life is coming to a close. His instructions to Timothy have the urgency that come from a person knowing that his time is limited. His message is practical, direct, and, as I said, urgent—right from the beginning of this passage, when he urges, “Come quickly.”

The theme question for today, “What do you need?” is imbedded in this passage as Paul expresses himself to Timothy. Again, he is direct and the tone is urgent.

- I have been abandoned or “deserted” by some (vv. 10, 16) and I’m warning you about these others (v. 14).
- Implicitly, he is saying he trusts Timothy like he does no one else.
- I need my cloak, books, and parchments (v. 13).

- Paul is determined, still mission-focused, and trusts God to be present with him despite the hardships he has faced and which confront him now (vv. 17-18).
- Paul is in prison, but his tone and message, with its direct requests, “Here’s what I need. . .” indicate he’s still in charge. He is direct and, considering his setting, he’s bold or confident.

A Conversation with Kate Bowler

Continuing in that spirit of learning from others who have known grief and loss, I want to introduce you to Kate Bowler. . .



- She is a professor of American Religious History at Duke Divinity School.
- The focus of her research has been on the Prosperity Gospel, which is a distortion of the gospel which rests on the assumptions that God so wants to bless you that you just must believe in the right way and pray in the right way so that God will bless you with material wealth and other forms of good things. This also bears the assumption that if you have hardship in your life, then you must not be faithful enough or praying earnestly enough, because you’re not experiencing those blessings. Essentially, you’re to blame; it’s your fault.

In the course of her ongoing research and writing about the Prosperity Gospel, she was diagnosed, as young woman at age 35, with stage 4 colon cancer. So then her professional life with her research and immersion in the world of the Prosperity Gospel Movement, got intertwined with the very real and personal circumstance of facing a life-threatening health condition and ongoing treatment.

Her book, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*¹, with the cover pictured her, addresses the overlapping professional and personal concerns.

In the spirit of learning from others who have experienced pain and loss and in keeping with the conversational tone of “**I’ve been meaning to ask. . . what do you need?**,” I want to share with you a section she included in her book as an appendix and have a conversation with her about that. She herself has a conversational tone as she writes, “Give this a go. See how this works: A short list” (Appendix 2, p. 173).

The following bold-print wisdom sayings will be displayed on the screen. Her wisdom is in regular text and my comments are in italicized text.

¹Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*. Random House, 2018.

6 Things to Say (or Not) to a Friend in Need² By Kate Bowler

Kate Bowler was just 35 when she was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer. Here, she shares the words that actually make a difference to someone having a rough time, from her book *Everything Happens for a Reason*.

1. "I'd love to bring you a meal this week. Can I email you about it?"

Oh, thank goodness. I am starving, but mostly I can never figure out something to tell people [what] I need, even if I need it. But really, bring me anything. Chocolate. A potted plant. A set of weird erasers. I remember the first gift I got that wasn't about cancer, and I was so happy I cried. Send me funny emails filled with YouTube clips to watch during chemotherapy. Do something that suits your talents. But most important, *bring me presents!*

This follows right along with our Sanctified Art theme of directly asking, "What do you need?" Ask—ask directly. Another helpful thing here is that the friend offers a practical, tangible thing: "I'd like to bring you a meal." Sometimes, people are so overwhelmed that even making a decision about everyday things—What to have for dinner—can be overwhelming. For someone to suggest that and take care of it can be a sign of grace.

2. "You are a beautiful person."

Unless you are used to speaking in a creepy windowless-van kind of voice, comments like these go a long way. Tell your friend something about his or her life that you admire without making it feel like a eulogy.

This is just a loving affirmation to someone who is likely feeling isolated and alone.

3. "I am so grateful to hear about how you're doing. Just know that I'm on your team."

You mean I don't have to give you an update? You asked someone else for all the gory details? *Whew.* Great! Now, I get to feel like you are both informed and concerned. So, don't gild the lily. What you have said is amazing, so don't screw it up now by being a nosy Nellie. Ask a question about any other aspect of my life.

This is a hard one. I can see that sometimes it is fatiguing for a person in pain to have to recount everything again (Maybe this is especially true for a cancer patient in active treatment), but at the same time, avoidance (by a potential listener) is a real challenge to overcome—Sometimes others are so reluctant to listen and really hear the pain of another person that they don't ask at all. They're not sure they are willing to sit there with you in the midst of that loss like Job's friends were with him. Sometimes people

² Excerpted at Oprah.com: <https://www.oprah.com/inspiration/kate-bowler-6-things-to-say-or-not-to-a-friend-in-need>. The book was published in 2018 by Random House.

don't ask because they don't want to know because they can't bear it. I'd want to talk with Kate a bit more about this: I'd want to gently ask a friend who is hurting, "How are things going?" and then let the other person's reply indicate to you what they want (and don't want to talk about.) If you don't ask them, you don't give them that opportunity.

4. "Can I give you a hug?"

Some of my best moments with people have come with a hug or a hand on the arm. People who are suffering often—not always—feel isolated and want to be touched. Hospitals and big institutions in general tend to treat people like cyborgs or throwaways. So, ask whether your friend feels up for a hug and give her some sugar.

Yes—this can be a sign of reconnection. We talked about the power of touch to reconnect last week when we talked about Jesus and the woman with a hemorrhage.

5. "Oh, my friend, that sounds so hard."

Perhaps the weirdest thing about having something awful happen is the fact that no one wants to hear about it. People tend to want to hear the summary, but they don't usually want to hear it from you. And that it was awful. So, simmer down and let your friend talk for a bit. Be willing to stare down the ugliness and sadness. Life is absurdly hard, and pretending it isn't is exhausting.

Yes, what she says here is consistent with what I was saying in reply to #3. How does she explain the difference between her #3 and #5? I guess #3 is when the person impacted doesn't want to talk and #5 is when they do wish to talk, but people haven't shown a willingness to listen.

*Plus, what she shows here is the friend's **acknowledgement**—it's what we said before about acknowledging the pain and the frustration and the stinky-ness of what's happening as this person is experiencing it, rather than a minimizing comment like, "Don't cry; At least it's not. . .; or You've got to get over it!"*

6. *****Silence*****

The truth is that no one knows what to say. It's awkward. Pain is awkward. Tragedy is awkward. People's weird, suffering bodies are awkward. But take the advice of one man who wrote to me with his policy: Show up and shut up.

Job's friends had the wisdom to do this—to just be in silence together. And listen to her wisdom saying: "No one knows what to say."

May we have the wisdom to learn from others. May we have the courage to speak up and ask, "What do you need?" May we have the insight to know when to be quiet, to listen, and to be present.