

“I’ve Been Meaning to Ask: What Do You Need?”

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Job 2:11-13

2 Timothy 4:9-18

I want to congratulate Job’s three friends: Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. I want to congratulate them, because in chapter two of the book of Job, they do all the right things for someone in need. You see, their friend Job was in need, because he had lost everything: his oxen and cattle and donkeys and camels. His house collapsed. His servants were killed. All of his sons and his daughters: dead. He was infected with loathsome sores from head to toes— maybe some kind of ancient monkeypox. Scripture describes him scratching at his sores with a shard of pottery, and sitting in ashes.

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar heard about all their friend Job had suffered. They gathered together to walk to his house— or what used to be his house. The man they encountered did not even resemble the friend they had known. And in deep empathy, they wept, and they tore their clothes, and threw dust upon their heads. And then, they sat with him on the ground— since there was no home to shelter them.

These three get an A+ for friendship and solidarity in chapter two. They teamed up on how to give him care— it is good, if possible, to have a community to give care, rather than be on your own to give care. They hold grief with him, and show that they are moved by what he has lost and experienced. After this week of silent solidarity, they listen as Job speaks, and curses the day he was born, and describes his pain— sighs that come like bread, and groanings that pour out like water. Their actions model what many Jews practice today, in the practice of *shivah* after someone dies.

It’s when they finally opened their mouths that they became less than helpful for Job. Instead of sitting with him in the complex mystery of his suffering, they play armchair theologians. The first friend, Eliphaz, first tells Job how much he has been a source of strength for others. But then, he goes on to say that “those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same— implying that Job, which the scriptures had already described as blameless— must have done something wrong that deserved punishment. Bildad similarly insists that God never punishes a blameless person. Zophar goes a step further, and urges Job to repent of his unknown sins.

You may have heard modern versions of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar and their so-called comfort. Phrases such as “God has a plan for everything,” or “Everything happens for a reason,” or “God won’t give you more than you can handle,” or “You just need more faith.” These phrases are often used for comfort by well-meaning people. But the phrases can add to misery, to make people think that God gave you suffering because you deserve it for some reason, or that God had a purpose in making you suffer, or that if your faith were only stronger,

you would not be suffering the way you are. I know these things aren't true. Sometimes, suffering simply happens for no reason. It is not deserved or meant to serve a higher purpose, it simply is. That doesn't mean that God, and the people God sends, can't help to point you toward resilience and hope in the face of suffering.

I believe Paul had a sense of that resilience. He wrote this letter to Timothy from prison, where he was imprisoned because he had upset the political landscape. We can imagine Paul has already suffered a lot. It makes me think of WNBA basketball star Brittney Griner, who moved from a basketball arena to being held in a Russian prison under false charges and being used as a pawn in a much larger geo-political arena. I wonder what she would say that she needs right now, in order to feel hopeful and find purpose.

In the face of suffering, Paul points to what he needs to move forward. In his case, he needs people who have his back. He points out that some of his relationships have let him down. Dimas, Titus, and Crescens abandoned him. Even worse, Alexander— that sneaky coppersmith— did Paul some kind of great harm, and so Paul warns Timothy, “Look out for him!” But of Timothy, Paul asks, “Do your best to come to me soon!” And he also asks for tools that will help him through his imprisonment: a cloak for comfort, and his books, and some parchments— for at that point, Paul had realized the power his letters had to shape the Christian faith and draw others to it. Even if Paul's imprisonment kept him from preaching in person, his message could leave far beyond his cell— and it did!

I admire Paul for asking for what we needed. Sometimes, we think, “If you care about me, you should just *know*.” But 15 years of marriage has taught me that sometimes, it is better to ask than to just assume people will show up and provide for you. Asking makes us a little vulnerable, because there is always that disappointing possibility that you can directly ask for what you need, and the other person will not or cannot give it to you. There have been times in my life when I have thought it is better to not ask, because I do not want to be disappointed. But after trying it out for some time, and sometimes indeed getting disappointed, I have found that overall, the potential benefit of asking for what I need far outweighs the potential disappointment I risk in asking and being denied.

Still, there is a special grace when another senses what you need and gives it with generous compassion. I was touched this past week to read a story posted of a moment at the Little League Southwest Championship game. The Pearland team was a powerful team, and used to winning. Their pitcher, Kaiden, was described as a big pitcher and a big hitter. The Oklahoma team was the underdog heading into the game, and their shortstop, Isaiah, was described as scrappy but persevering. When Isaiah went to the plate in the first inning, the game was 3-2, and coaches from both sides were screaming at the boys to “Battle, battle.” Kaiden pitched, but lost control of his fastball. Thwack! It hit Isaiah in the head. The field was silent, except for the umpire's voice, saying, “Oh my God!” By then Isaiah was on the ground. All the players had taken a knee.

Now as someone who regularly watches youth soccer, I have to tell you that it's a very emotional thing when the whole field takes a knee for someone who has been injured. I can't help it- I cry each time; doesn't matter if it's my daughter's team or the other team, if it's a skinned knee or a broken arm. And though I don't watch lots of baseball, last Friday night I stood in for Chris on her softball team. Since I am a lefty, my back was to the dugout, so each time I hit a foul ball (it happened a few times), my teammates in the dugout gasped when they heard that thwack; they couldn't tell if the ball hit my body or my bat.

Anyway, luckily Isaiah had been hit in the helmet and after being checked out, he was clearly just fine. But Kaiden, the pitcher, was still shaken to think that he could be the one that would hurt someone else, the one to cause others to say "*Oh my God.*" Standing on the mound, all of the sudden the pitcher burst into tears. His parents didn't go to him. His coaches didn't go to him. The pitcher's mound became an island onto which he was marooned. Until someone did approach him, to offer what was needed: Isaiah, the boy who had been hit by the fastball, came up to him, threw his arms around him, and showed Kaiden that it was okay, that *he* was okay. In a few short days, these boys have inspired the world as a model of integrity in sports.

I like to think that our church has that kind of compassion. I certainly caught a glimpse of it yesterday when we had 12 people who showed up to sort and carry food for our neighbors coming to the Emergency Food Pop-Up we hosted through Center for Food Action— for this event, our biggest pop-up yet; 40% of the clients who came were coming to Center for Food Action for the first time. In addition to that generosity in sharing food, the youth and young adults who were there helped with the food and when that slowed down, they spent time in the back of the church, weeding along the fence and the cracks in the back parking lot.

I know caring for others' needs is not unique to Christianity, but for Christians it is a *requirement* that we have some level of compassion and care for the needs in a community and beyond.

And we can also be on the receiving end of that compassion and care. We can allow our needs to be tended to. **So, I've been meaning to ask, what *do* you need?** What do you need to make it through the week, the year? What do you need in order to not only survive, but also to thrive? What in you needs tending, that will enable you to then tend the world with Christian compassion? It's okay to take care of our needs. It is okay to allow others to care for us and our needs. And, it is okay to ask for what we need.

We give generosity, and we receive generosity. Similarly, at Christ's table, we take, and eat, and drink what we need. In doing so, we remember Jesus, and the ways he reaches our even deeper need. As we are so generously fed, we can turn to the world with that generosity. We can feed the hungry and hold the weeping. We can listen and we can sit in silent solidarity until, eventually, that way toward hope becomes clear.