

A Life of Caring

Isaiah 25: 6-9; John 11: 32-44

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I. Introduction

Last night was one of my favorite nights of the year, which is not because I like to get into costumes, which I do, but because we get an extra hour of sleep and it makes me absurdly happy. It's not even that much time but it feels like this huge gift that gets dropped in my lap. Now I know it's actually not an extra hour, and it's going to get taken back from me in the spring. But there is still this sense of rejoicing about this extra hour that we get because time is so precious and it's the piece in our lives that often feels that we're the most in need of. You can't buy time. You can't get time any place else. You've got what you've got and you've got to figure out how to make it work.

So, we've entitled our stewardship program this year *It's About Time* as a reminder that what we do with our time and our money are the two greatest indicators of what it is in our lives that we value. Stewardship is about how we care for all of the gifts that God has given us but time and money seem to be two that are hugely indicative of what is important in our lives. So, every week we've been focusing on a different area of God's work in the life of our church in the hope that we start to claim this promise that when we do things with our time that are God's things, they give our lives meaning and purpose and transform the world, and then the other pieces of our time fall into place. So, we've been walking through each of the program areas in the life of our church, and this Sunday we're going to talk about our ministries of caring. So, if you all have this wonderful brochure in your bulletin, don't look at it now but know that it's there and has a list of all of these very powerful places in the life of our church. These include trust circles, where we nurture and build each other up in our spiritual journeys, where we comfort each other, when we are in times of need, where we are present with one another, when we have experienced death. So, it's an appropriate focus for our All Saints' Day today.

II. Empathy

Our Gospel lesson gives us a wonderful example of what ministries of caring look like. We're preaching all through this series out of our lectionary texts, so these are the texts that the church has laid out for this Sunday in the year but it's a wonderful story, this very familiar story of Lazarus, about what caring ministries look like.

This story is only told in the Gospel of John and it's sort of a hinge point in the narrative of John's Gospel. Up to this point, Jesus has been focusing on his public ministry primarily in Galilee, and it's at this point in the story that Jesus in John's Gospel starts to move towards Jerusalem and the passion narrative.

So, Jesus is moving towards Jerusalem as we engage the story and he goes to Bethany which is just a couple of miles outside of the capital city and he's going to visit his dear friends -- Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Now we find out in the verses that precede today's reading that Lazarus has been quite sick, and Mary and Martha have sent news to Jesus that Lazarus is sick, asking him to come in the hope that he can do something, and Jesus' disciples are trying to urge him along to get to Bethany quickly. And Jesus seems oddly recalcitrant, he's sort of taking his time for some reason, so that by the time he gets to Bethany Lazarus has already died.

So, in today's passage Jesus encounters the family and the community after Lazarus's death and models for us in, I think, a very helpful way what ministries of caring look like. And the first thing I want to draw your attention to is the fact that right from the beginning Jesus engages in a very powerful ministry of presence. Jesus does not keep this death at arm's length. Jesus is engaged and participates actively in the process of grieving along with the family and the community, so that John tells us that Jesus was greatly disturbed and deeply moved at Lazarus's death, words that connote a deepness of feeling and an almost agitated anxiety, upsetness about the death. And as John tells us, Jesus wept with the people. That's a helpful piece for us to start with because most of us spend a lot of time avoiding places of pain and grief and suffering, and we have a society that has raised this to a fine art, all the ways that we separate ourselves from people and situations where there is death and suffering.

That's a fairly natural reaction emotionally for most of us because if we are with people who are suffering or who have experienced death, that is a very powerful reminder of the places in our own life where we experience suffering and a powerful reminder of our own death and very few of us like being reminded of that, amen? So, we avoid those places.

And even when we get in those places and we are with people that we love that are suffering, our tendency, our deep, passionate desire is to do something to make that suffering stop, right? We can't let suffering happen. And so, what often happens is we say things that are supremely unhelpful. I want to remind you of a wonderful insight that is practiced in this discipline of trust circles, you learn how to not say things in situations that didn't require saying things. But many of us get into places where people have experienced death and suffering and want to help them make sense of it, so, we say things like, "God needed your loved one in heaven." Well, you know what, that is lousy theology and it is supremely unhelpful to someone who has lost a loved one. We say, "God won't give you more than you can bear." Well, as Janet helped us understand this summer, that's also a lousy theology and not helpful. "It's all part of a bigger plan," we tell people. In other words, "Don't worry. It's all going to work itself out." Well, those aren't helpful things to say to someone who has lost a loved one, who is experiencing a terminal illness, who has a spouse or a child who's wrestling with addiction. It is not our role to try to make sense of these things. It is our call as Jesus does to simply be present with them.

Jesus doesn't try to make sense of Lazarus's death to Mary and Martha at all. He cries. He is present with them fully. And even when the people around him criticized him for not getting there quicker, he doesn't respond defensively. This is another helpful sidebar as we reflect on ministries of caring because often when we are the ministers to people who are in a dark place, a place of suffering or death, we are often invited by them implicitly to justify where God is in those situations, and people will say to us, "How could God allow this to happen to me? Why didn't God answer my prayers?" And that sounds, if you're in that situation, like an invitation to reflect theologically on who God is and how God works. It's not. It is a word of pain and all that we need to do is be present with that person in pain.

Being engaged in ministries of caring in our church is primarily to be present when somebody needs our presence. It is not about justifying God. It is not about making sense of tragedy. It is about being there just as Jesus was in a moment of someone else's need.

III. Promise

There may be, however, in that moment an opportunity to speak a reminding word of promise that's not about explaining why things happen or justifying God. It's about reminding people that in the midst of their deepest suffering, God is present. It is okay to say, "I don't know why people suffer. I don't know why you lost a loved one. I don't know why you're going through this hard place. But what I do know is that God is here with you," which is what we model when we place ourselves there and that in whatever the situation, God's Holy Spirit, God's spirit of resurrection is seeking to bring out new life, to bring hope from despair and freedom from captivity and life from death.

This is the second thing that Jesus does in this wonderful story. He says to Martha, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you would see the glory of God?" These are words that remind Martha that in the midst of her pain and loss, God is present and working.

That's, of course, what Isaiah is about in our wonderful passage from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning. Speaking to people who are in captivity, Isaiah's words are words of promise that in the midst of your desolation and oppression, God is working to bring about a new world and that word of promise helps then shape how we watch for where God might be moving. And again, I want to say that with some carefulness because if the person that you are sitting with says, "It doesn't feel like God is present at all," that is again not an invitation to have an argument about theology. All you've got to do is sit. What those words do is plant a seed. You don't have to do anything with the seed. All you've got to do is offer a word of hope and let that word then start to take root.

IV. Space

Reminding people of God's promise is not about offering trite truisms about why suffering happens. It is to speak the good news that in the midst of all kinds of death,

the Holy Spirit is seeking to bring forth new life. And then we plant that seed and we let God take it from there. Because ultimately, dear friends, we don't bring about healing in places of suffering and death. All we do, all we are called to do in ministries of caring is to create a space for the Holy Spirit to work. It is the Holy Spirit who Jesus tells us in this Gospel is the comforter, the one who brings life out of death, and we don't have to take that job on. All we have to do is plant a seed so that the Holy Spirit can start to shape how people continue then to experience their suffering and death.

The story of Lazarus is the story of Jesus being present and being vulnerable, vulnerable enough to weep, reminding Martha and us that in the midst of death and darkness, the Holy Spirit is at work, and then Jesus stepping back and letting God do what God does, which is to bring forth life from death.

V. Conclusion

Time. Ministries of caring are about time. They're about taking the time to be with people in places where they need discernment and places where they need comfort and places where they need support, places where they need to know that somebody loves them. And in a society that values rushing and busyness, that's a hard call to answer. But it's a powerful call, it's a transformative call, and we have so many rich opportunities for you to engage in that ministry of time, of taking the time to be with someone in their moment of need. It is notable to me that when Jesus hears about Lazarus being sick, Jesus does not rush. Jesus takes his time. He gets pushed by Mary and Martha, he gets pulled by his disciples, and Jesus understands that it's all God's time and that when we are listening for where God's spirit leads us everything falls into place. Jesus knows that it's all God's time and that when we offer it to God, God does amazing things with it.

Amen.