

“What Do You Need?”
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Job 2:11-13, 2 Timothy 4:9-18

So earlier this week I had myself a little rant, and it went something like this...

This doesn't feel like a vacation week, because here I am writing a sermon.

I don't want to sit and reflect about what is happening in the West with the wildfires and see more of those terrible images of people losing everything on the nightly news.

I don't want to think about Governor Cuomo stepping down, and how his exit speech sounded like he was making every excuse in the book while not taking any responsibility for his predatory behavior.

I don't want to think about how the Delta Variant has thrown this huge monkey wrench into our lives again, and I certainly don't want to think about all the details that I'm going to need to think about.

I don't want to deal with all problems in the world, and I don't want to write a sermon that feels like coin operated inspiration.

In fact, I really don't feel like thinking at all.

Oh, and I don't want to deal with my husband losing his phone at work and having to spend half a day on AT&T Customer support getting it all ironed out, or how the starter decided to suddenly no longer work on my truck, and how I didn't get nearly enough done on this staycation week "off".

I really did go on this kind of tirade last Wednesday, and when I was finally finished, my husband Clark turned to me and said, "What do you need?"

I didn't even know how to answer him.

And it was silly, because this is exactly the question we are considering today, in this third installment of our summer sermon series... "What do you need?"

It's an important question to consider as we seek to connect across the many divides that have fractured our personal and public lives. As we seek right relationship with God and one another, asking it can help us lean in, with curiosity and compassion, and create a space for healing.

Scripture is full of examples of people in need, people in the midst of situations that have no easy fix or quick solutions.

Job, perhaps, is the granddaddy of them all! He lost everything, his children, his property, his livelihood, his health. And while there are a lot of directions we could go in studying his story, the focus for today is on how his friends first responded to his need.

You might remember that their helpfulness completely went off the rails, a little later in the story... but today, they got it right.

Once they heard what had happened to their friend Job, they left their homes, their families, their schedules and they showed up together just to be with him. And when they saw what a terrible state he was in, they wept – they ugly cried. Then, they tore their clothes, symbolically tearing open the protection around their hearts... next, they threw dirt and debris in the air above their heads to remind them they were just dust...

Maybe to our modern ears it sounds a little over the top, but their emotional response reflected the magnitude of the trauma their friend had endured.

Sometimes when we're trying to support another person, we struggle with how much emotion to express in our culture. Some people tell me that they try hard not to cry when they are in the room with a suffering friend.

Of course, when trying to help another we want to avoid making ourselves the center of attention by expressing so much emotion that the one who's struggling feels compelled to take care of us. But to shed a tear and grieve alongside those who are grieving can be an act of presence, of solidarity, so they don't feel so alone.

After their initial expression of emotion, Job's friends did something both difficult and beautiful. They sat with him, in silence, for seven days. Perhaps they knew that words in those moments were absolutely inadequate. They might have been tempted to offer an opinion, or a pep talk with words of advice, but they resisted. At least for those seven days, they simply offered their presence in the midst of his suffering.

What the friends demonstrated in this early part of the story is empathy. You've heard me talk about Brene Brown before, she is an author and researcher and social worker who writes eloquently about how we make meaningful connections with each other. She talks about the important differences between empathy and sympathy, and here's what she says...

"So what is empathy, and why is it very different than sympathy? ... to me, I always think of empathy as this kind of sacred space. When someone's kind of in a deep hole, and they shout out from the bottom and they say, 'I'm stuck, it's dark and I'm overwhelmed' and then we look (down) and we say, "Hey, I'll come down and join you. I know what it's like down here, and you're not alone."

Sympathy (on the other hand) is shouting down to the person in the hole if they'd like (you to make them) a sandwich."

Job's friends didn't stand at the top of the pit and offer him a sandwich. Instead they were empathetic, they entered into Job's experience, and felt it alongside him as best they could. They cried. They tore their clothes. And then they got in the pit with him, so that he wasn't alone in his suffering.

In the midst of great trauma, Job didn't (and perhaps couldn't) tell his friends what he needed. But the biblical witness shows that simple presence, embodied love, is a good place to start.

In our reading from Second Timothy, Paul knows exactly what he needs, and he doesn't hesitate to ask for it. Languishing in prison, Paul finds himself in a place of feeling deserted and abandoned by his friends and helpers. He very specifically says to Timothy, *"Come, please come and quickly, if you can."* On top of that he has other requests... *"bring my favorite coat and bring my books, and especially the parchment, so that I can write."* It's as if he was saying, *"Bring me the things that give me comfort, reassurance, the things that will help me to make me feel like myself again."*

And while most of our stuff is just stuff, it can also have a lot of meaning attached to it. Have you ever been away from home, perhaps in the hospital, and you really wanted some of your stuff... your favorite blanket, your iPad, your book, your reading glasses, a photo of someone you love?

Some of you may have heard of Kate Bowler, she's a professor at Duke, a writer and she was diagnosed with stage four cancer at the age of 35. I've been reading her book *"Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved"* and she says this,

"I can never figure out something to tell people that 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. I was so happy, I cried. Send me funny emails. Emails filled with YouTube clips to

watch during chemotherapy, do something that suits your talents, but most important, bring me presents that matter.

Sometimes people know what stuff they need, and sometimes they don't. But presence in the "being with" sense of the word and presents in the chocolate or plant or weird eraser sense of the word, all of it, makes a difference."

I don't know if that resonates with your experience, but it certainly does with mine. In my times of greatest need both of those things made a difference. Thirty years ago, I was the victim of a violent crime (what happened is a story for another day). When I think back to the crazy weeks that followed during my recovery, I learned that the content of people's concern didn't really matter. It was the people themselves, showing up, sometimes with cards, or gifts, or jokes, sometimes with a cup of coffee or an offer to take a walk.

All of that, whatever it was, felt like grace.

I specifically remember a very awkward encounter with one of the professors I worked for in the Engineering dept. He was a funny, quirky guy from Great Britain who I liked a lot. When I came back to the office we had this very brief exchange. I could feel how uncomfortable he was, and I knew that it was hard for him to talk to me when he said, *"Well, when I heard about what happened to you I thought, isn't that tacky?"*

It was a weird thing to say, it didn't totally hit the mark in terms of accuracy, but it did in terms of kindness, because I knew he was making an effort to show he cared (however awkward that moment was). What he said reminds me that even when I don't say the exact right thing to a hurting friend, the sentiment, the gesture, the caring still counts for something.

As human beings we all have needs, and we need each other on this life's journey. We are not islands unto ourselves. "What do you need?" is a question that we might wisely plant in our hearts so that it might be ready on our lips for another day.

It's a question that honors and respects the one in need. It's a question that fuels connection and allows us those created in the image of God to live into our calling, embodying love incarnate in the world around us.

"What do you need?" May we have the courage and the compassion to keep asking and answering the question. Amen.