

Message: Being with God

The most powerful lessons we learn about life are learned when we face a crisis. I know of a young man who learned profound lessons recently. “He and his friends had gone to Alaska on a hunting trip. A small Super Cub airplane dropped them off in the wilderness for a week. They were experienced hunters and had all the equipment they needed, including a satellite phone. On the last day of their trip, the young man saw a moose. He fired off one round, to no effect. The moose started toward him. He raised his gun and fired another round, only to feel intense pain. He looked down and saw that the gun had literally broken in half. The back half had crashed into his face, lacerating it and crushing one eye. He still can’t see out of that eye today.”¹

After the accident, this young man was in intensive care and recovery. He went through a series of operations. As he was wondering whether he would see again, this young man wrote down a list of questions and sent them to his pastor. These are the kinds of questions that lead us to life lessons in the face of suffering:

- What am I doing? Where am I going?
- What does God want me to do?
- What does God have in store for me?
- What should I do with God’s blessings?
- What should I do with God’s trials?
- Will I become resentful?²

As you hear this set of questions, you probably have the same reaction that I do. You wonder how you’d answer. How do we begin to become part of God’s solution in the life of someone who is suffering?

I want to encourage you. Everyone who follows Jesus is qualified to help those who are suffering. We don’t have to be brilliant or articulate or persuasive. We don’t need experience. All we have to do is allow God to use us in an act of love. We’re invited to care for others through what people call the ministry of presence.

¹Some material from <https://www.christianity.com/theology/the-ministry-of-presence-11561796.html>

² *Ibid*

Here’s what Henri Nouwen said about the ministry of presence:

“More and more, the desire grows in me simply to walk around, greet people, enter their homes, sit on their doorsteps, play ball, throw water, and be known as someone who wants to live with them. It’s a privilege to have the time to practice this simple ministry of presence. Still, it’s not as simple as it seems. My own desire to be useful, to do something significant, or to be part of some impressive project is so strong that soon my time is taken up by meetings, conferences, study groups, and workshops that prevent me from walking the streets. It’s difficult not to have plans, not to organize people around an urgent cause, and not to feel that you are working directly for social progress. But I wonder more and more if the first thing shouldn’t be to know people by name, to eat and drink with them, to listen to their stories and tell your own, and to let them know with words, handshakes, and hugs that you do not simply like them, but truly love them.”³

Does it convict you? It convicts me. Our life often seems to follow Nouwen’s statement, *“my own desire to be useful, to do something significant, or to be part of some impressive project.”* Yet, we see Jesus’ life more like the opposite. In the Gospel accounts, we often see Jesus sitting at tables eating with sinners. He shared meals with people. Meals are time consuming. Yet, he often sat with tax collectors and Gentiles – those outside his group, and spent time rubbing up against them. Do we do that? Not so much.

Some of us learned the story of Zacchaeus when we were children.

[*read Luke 19:1-10.*] Zacchaeus was an outsider, successful in his career, yet he wasn’t welcome by the group. Zacchaeus was unpopular: he collected taxes from his own people on behalf of the Romans. Yet Jesus saw something in him. Jesus went and spent time with Zacchaeus, no matter what people said. The result: Zacchaeus was saved and restored to his community. Jesus’ presence made the difference. Salvation begins with a relationship.

³ <https://takingeachthoughtcaptive.wordpress.com/2014/03/04/henri-nouwen-and-the-ministry-of-presence/>

United Methodist Bishop Joe Pennel says this, *“The ministry of presence is a way of ‘being’ rather than a way of ‘doing’ or ‘telling.’ As we prepare to be with [others] we should not think about what to say or what to do. We should not anticipate how to react if certain situations should develop. Instead, we should inwardly prepare ourselves to focus on the ‘now’ with feeling and care.”*⁴

This lesson is something we learn more and more as we try to do what Jesus has called us to do. We see in our heart the desire for prestige and title. Our achievements really won’t mean a thing in twenty, thirty or forty years. The position we hold, or will hold, will be given to someone else in due time. The thing that matters most is that people know we love them and care for them. And, more importantly, our love and care are small extensions of Jesus’ greater love and care for them. The real test for success isn’t whether people honor us, but whether in twenty-five years our children are still following and loving Jesus. Does our spouse see a caring, loving partner? Do we point people to Jesus by our words and deeds? Money, position, and titles don’t automatically bring any of those things. Our presence as a Christ follower can.

The ministry of presence is part of our baptism. It’s one of the five dedications we make, along with prayers, giving, service and witness. The ministry of presence follows the movement of grace. God is present in the world before we show up. God is present with us. God is present to others through us. Our part in it is to be connected to God, to be in a relationship based on love and to answer God’s call to go into the world and share what we have with others.

The Bible is filled with examples of God’s presence before us, from the burning bush Moses saw (Exodus 3:1-6) to Isaiah’s vision of God on the throne (Isaiah 6:1-8) to the passage we read, Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountain top (Matt. 17:1-17). God goes before us.

God is present with us. That’s the very meaning of Jesus’ name. God came to earth to show us another way. If that sounds crazy, it is. But it’s true because God is crazy about you! Jesus knows the challenges we

⁴ <http://unitedmethodistreporter.com/2012/12/25/commentary-ministry-of-presence-is-the-most-important-gift/>

face. He’s lived them. Jesus’ love for us is so great; he gave his life for us. In his absence, we have the Holy Spirit, who Jesus sent to live in us. God is present with us.

God is present through us. When we spend time with others, in our neighborhoods and with our congregation, God is present. There’s a spiritual connection that happens. Our souls bless others. We’re an integral part of God’s mission. That’s why the writer of Hebrews says, *“Don’t stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other…”* (10:25).

The question is: are we present with God and others? All too often, I’m afraid the answer is “no.” We get caught up in the hurried pace of life – work, family, chores and entertainment, and we lose sight of what’s truly important – time with others, time with our family, time with our spouse and time with God. Even if we’re physically present, we’re really absent. Or we get hurt – physically or by something someone did or said. We turn away, rather than fighting. This is particularly difficult if it happens in a church, as people often feel they can’t remain in the same congregation. Rather than going to God first and then going to the other person to be present for them in love, to be reconciled, we separate. We’re absent.

Truth is, we build each other up when we’re present with God together. We’re better together than we are apart. We encourage and stretch each other in a healthy way. Our view and experience of God increases when we gather with others and hear their stories; how they’ve experienced God in other ways. God’s Spirit is present. When we’re present for another person, spiritual work is going on. Paul teaches us *“the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don’t know what we should pray, but the Spirit ... pleads our case with unexpressed groans”* (Romans 8:25). Even when we don’t know what to say or do when we’re with someone, God’s Spirit is working in them, through us.

Philip Yancey wrote, *“A friend of mine who researched thousands of saints in order to select 365 for a daily devotional guide told me that almost all of them climbed slopes of increasing difficulty. As God*

*entrusts us with more responsibility, the hardships may increase as well. Feelings of abandonment intensify, any sense of the presence of God fades, and temptations and doubts multiply.”*⁵

Just as there is a ministry of presence, there is a ministry of absence. The 16th century Carmelite monk John of the Cross said, “*No soul will ever grow deep in the spiritual life unless God works passively in that soul ... [through absence].*”⁶ The book of Job is all about loss and suffering. God allows trials to come to us, not to tear us down, but to help us learn and grow.

Just as parents wean their children, so we have to learn to trust that God will be present even when we feel as though we’re alone. David knew this challenge. He wrote, “*I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned child that is with me*” (Psalm 131:2). Think about it.

When we were children, our parents encouraged us to take our first step. We tried, and fell down. We did that again ... and again ... and again. Until, one day, we took our first step. And then we fell down. But we got back up and tried again ... and again ... and again. A year later, most of were running across the room. That’s what it’s like when we learn to trust God, to know God will be present in each and every moment of our lives. That’s what it will be like to learn to be present with God in each moment and then to surrender ourselves to God.

All too often, life disappoints us. We experience pain and suffering – directly or indirectly. We’re confused, frustrated, angry, depressed. We turn away. We turn away from the ones who hurt us – who need us. We turn away from friends – who care for us. We turn away from family – who need us. We turn away from church – who make us better. We turn away from God – who gives us real life. We withdraw, seeking solace but only finding loneliness and misery. That’s absence. It’s a natural, normal part of life. The hard part is realizing that God is present, even when we feel lost.

⁵ <http://thisido.blogspot.com/2010/01/ministry-of-absence.html>

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 182-3

Jesus said to his disciples, “I assure you that it is better for you that I go away” (John 16:7). Then he said, “*I have much more to say to you, but you can’t handle it now*” (v16). God doesn’t leave us on our own out of spite, anger or disregard. God leaves us alone so we can mature, so our soul learns to lean on God for everything, even when we feel abandoned and alone. What God wants is for us to try again ... and again ... and again.

What we need to be is more patient. We need to wait on God. We need to learn spiritual meekness and humility. We can hold on. We can ask for help. We can rest. We can ask someone else to pray if we can’t. We can let go of our need to hurry.

Remain connected to God and to others. That’s the healthy way to live. Yes, we’re in pain. No, people don’t know how to deal with us when we’re confused and struggling. Yes, they love us even when we’re harsh and unkind. Hold onto one thing, no matter what: God’s love. It’s eternal, constant and unchanging. God loves us, no matter what we’ve done, said or left undone. We aren’t unworthy. We just feel that way.

Joseph Bayly and his wife Mary Lou lost three of their children. They lost one son following surgery when he was 18 days old. Their second son died at age five from leukemia. They lost a third son at age 18 after a sledding accident. Joseph wrote, “*I was sitting, torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God’s dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. They talked constantly; they said things I [already] knew were true. I was unmoved, except I wished they’d go away. They finally did. Another came and sat beside me for an hour and more; listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply and left. I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see them go.*”⁷

The greatest way we can be a friend is to be available. We don’t have to be brilliant, articulate or biblical scholars. Just show up. Be present. When you do, you’re following Jesus on the way to life.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, Christianity.com

Job 23:1-9 (CEB)

Today my complaint is again bitter;
my strength is weighed down because of my groaning.
Oh, that I could know how to find him -
come to his dwelling place;
I would lay out my case before him,
fill my mouth with arguments,
know the words with which he would answer,
understand what he would say to me.
Would he contend with me through brute force?
No, he would surely listen to me.
There those who do the right thing can argue with him;
I could escape from my judge forever.
Look, I go east; he’s not there,
west, and don’t discover him;
north in his activity, and I don’t grasp him;
he turns south, and I don’t see.

Matthew 17:1-7 (CEB)

Six days later Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and brought them to the top of a very high mountain. He was transformed in front of them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as light.

Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Jesus. Peter reacted to all of this by saying to Jesus, “Lord, it’s good that we’re here. If you want, I’ll make three shrines: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.”

While he was still speaking, look, a bright cloud overshadowed them. A voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son whom I dearly love. I am very pleased with him. Listen to him!” Hearing this, the disciples fell on their faces, filled with awe.

But Jesus came and touched them. “Get up,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.”