

## **I've Been Meaning to Ask...What Do You Need?** **Job 2:11-13 and 2 Timothy 4:9-18**

Rev. Nancy S. Lynn

July 18, 2021

I was walking through the church office the other day when I saw our accounting clerk, Jenn Green, and asked how she was doing. Her answer was perfect for so many people I know. "Pretty good," she said, "in a 2021 sort of way".

It's so true. We've definitely seen some positive changes recently. We are able to worship together again, see friends and family we've been separated from for months, go to restaurants and movies...Life is starting to feel sort of normal.

And yet so many people I know are struggling right now. For some, it's because the challenges of life continue even as the pandemic slows down. Friends and family members die, neighbors move away, people change jobs, and others get sick. And I think all of us have fewer emotional resources to draw on right now when these transitions in life happen.

However, the other thing I'm seeing among friends, colleagues, and parishioners is continued challenges with mental health - particularly anxiety and depression. Though things are getting better, we have all been through a traumatic experience that has been like an earthquake shaking the foundations of our lives. Everything in our lives was impacted- routines, work habits, family and friend connections - and we're not quite sure whether the ground is solid beneath our feet yet.

Many people are responding by re-evaluating their values and priorities, making changes in how they live, where they work, and how they spend their time. Perhaps you've seen the news articles recently about what has been named The Great Resignation. Thousands of employees across the country are leaving their jobs and, as we know, that is happening in churches, as well. I can name five churches off the top of my head that are looking for music staff and another five looking for a youth director. When something as disruptive as a global pandemic happens, it seems healthy and appropriate that people take time to consider what will give their lives purpose and meaning.

However, so much change only adds to our sense of instability, adds to the feeling of loss, and adds to our anxiety that nothing will be as it was before.

For the last few weeks, we have been in a sermon series entitled, "I've been meaning to ask". Tim started us out with the question "I've been meaning to ask where are you from" and then Amy Kennedy followed up last week with "I've been meaning to ask where does it hurt". Today our question is "I've been meaning to ask, what do you need?"

As we continue moving forward with our lives and as so many things are changing, what do you need to find moments of inner peace, to feel comfortable returning to church, to trust that despite all the upheaval around us, God is with us and at work in the chaos?

One thing that's hard about this sort of question is that we don't always know what we need. Yet, while others can try to anticipate what we need, ultimately we can only answer the question for ourselves. I can't tell you what you need to feel safe, to feel stable, and to feel loved. But, I can share some insights from scripture and from my own journey that might inspire you as you seek your own answer.

Both of today's scripture readings are about men who are facing tremendous challenges - Job and Paul. Job is the victim of one horrible event after another - his livestock dies, his employees die, his ten children all die, and he is afflicted with awful sores all over his body. How do you even engage the question of what you need when life completely overwhelms you?

Three of his friends come to his aid. For seven days all they do is to sit with him in silence. They realize that in his suffering, what he really needs is their presence. Unfortunately, when they do finally speak to him, they say all the wrong things - blaming him for his own misfortunes. But, it's their presence with him that makes a difference. He is not alone in his pain.

Sometimes that is what we need the most - just someone to be with us, be present to us, as we hurt or worry. And sometimes that is the greatest gift we can offer to someone else. Our non-judgmental, non-assuming, non-intrusive presence.

With Paul, the situation is somewhat different. He is writing to Timothy from the cold, dark prison in Rome where he is being held because of his faith and his teaching. Not only is he being persecuted for his faith, but he has been deserted by three of the people who had been traveling with him. Paul is very clear about what he needs. Like Job, he needs the presence of others to support him and to help him with his work. So, he writes to Timothy and asks him to come soon and bring Mark with him.

However, Paul has some very practical needs, as well. "When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments." So, perhaps one thing we can learn from Paul is that if we know what we need, it's okay to ask. So many of us aren't very good at that. We don't want to trouble our friends or family or, in some cases, to acknowledge that our situation has left us in need. Yet, we all know that when someone cares about you, they are anxious to find a way to help when you are hurting.

Another lesson from Paul about what we need in a time of struggle is that he leans into his faith. "At my first defense," he says, "no one came to my support, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength..." I will share with you that what has helped me most through these last sixteen months has been my faith that God is always at work for good in the world, creating opportunities for resurrection and new beginnings.

God has given me hope, and I know that if I turn to God, God is there waiting to offer me strength and courage and wisdom.

So, if we look at these scripture passages from Job and from Paul, the common themes are that in challenging times, we need each other and we need God. And we find each of them here in our church. This place offers us a community of people who will be present with us in our struggles. Friends who will stop by with a meal or some flowers when things are tough. A safe space to share our questions, fears, and anxieties. A community of mutual support and love. And a place to learn to know God - to respond to that deep spiritual yearning we feel to connect with God and experience God's goodness and love.

Some of you know that two weeks ago, my very dear friend and mentor died unexpectedly. I learned of her death half an hour before we were going to start our second day of program-planning at a staff retreat. I had carefully planned the agenda for our work, but I couldn't imagine leading at that particular moment. I can't tell you how much it meant to me to have our church staff and two of our lay leaders gather around me to pray, hug me, listen to my shock and grief, and then continue our work without me so that I could settle into this awful news. We do that for each other in Christian community and, by being present to each other in times of pain, we also grow closer to God.

So, as we ask this question, "What do you need?" perhaps one answer is "I need church". Yet, I'd like to look at one more person in scripture and what we learn about our needs from him. When you read through the gospels, you begin to see a pattern of what Jesus needed. Over and over again, what Jesus needs is time away from all the demands and expectations simply to be with God.

Dr. Bill Gaultiere says about this, "The priority of Jesus' solitude and silence is everywhere in the Gospels. It's how he began his ministry. It's how he made important decisions. It's how he dealt with troubling emotions like grief. It's how he dealt with the constant demands of his ministry and cared for his soul. It's how he taught his disciples. It's how he prepared for important ministry events. It's how he prepared for his death on the cross."

We know that we need each other, but sometimes don't recognize our need for time apart. Sometimes, we need space to escape the intensity of calendars and meetings, the demands of family and work, the relentless decision-making that has characterized this last year and a half for so many of us. We need to be able to search our own hearts, walk in the beauty of God's creation, and breathe deeply for a few moments of stillness and rest.

I pray that each of you is finding times and places this summer to get away from the things that worry or stress you. For the next two weeks, I plan to do exactly that. This weekend, I will be heading to a rustic cottage on a pretty little lake in northern Michigan to rest and reconnect with God, with my child, and with creation. I can do that because, despite a lot of changes, I know this church is in good hands. We have an amazing staff, incredible lay leadership, a staff-parish relations committee that is hard at work filling staff openings, and a congregation that

loves God, loves God's people, and loves this church. Above all, I have faith that God is at work loving and leading us into the future.

That's what I need but I've been meaning to ask, "What do you need?" Whatever your answer, may it be so. Amen.

The love of God be the passion  
in your heart.

The joy of God your strength  
when times are hard.

The presence of God a peace  
that overflows.

The Word of God the seed  
that you might sow. Amen.