

Message for September 24, 2023 Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church
“I’ve Been Meaning to Ask...What Do You Need?” Rev. Trish Eckert

“What do you need?” This can be a tough question to ask and an even tougher question to answer. Reaching out to someone, acknowledging their struggle, and giving them a chance to name what they need is a practice that actually takes practice. For many of us, it also takes practice to tune into ourselves – what is happening for me right now/what am I feeling/what do I need?

Most of us find it easier to help others than to take care of ourselves – ultimately, it is all intertwined – it takes vulnerability to name our needs and it takes vulnerability (a willingness to risk) to ask someone else what they need. Maybe your question will touch a nerve that causes the person to become defensive or burst into tears or respond like a wounded animal. Feelings can get messy, but then being human is a messy business, so as you come to know yourself and get in touch with how the world works, you’ll learn, with practice, that it’s best to wade into the mess rather than stay on an island by yourself.

I was thinking about this when I came across a blog post written by Koshin Paley Ellison, and it illustrates what I’ve described here so well, that I just want to read you the few paragraphs they posted: *I used to see myself as a rebel. I was into my identity as an outsider, and it was a place of safety for me for a long time. One year, however, my grandmother Mimi got sick. Her kids – my dad and his sister – wanted her to move from her home in Brooklyn to assisted living near where they lived, either in Syracuse or Atlanta. Neither option appealed to her, and so she asked if I would be willing to take care of her instead.*

I remember it so clearly: we were sitting on a wooden bench on Ocean Parkway, and I was feeling these little inward contractions, like, “Oh my God, she’s asking me?” I was thinking about how taking on this responsibility might not necessarily be very convenient.

Many of us have this habit: making our lives as tight and small as possible, and cutting ourselves off from others. It’s heartbreaking, the isolation we are prone to falling into.

Fortunately, on that day, I was also feeling such enormous love for her that I was able to expand outward instead. And so I told her that of course I would take care of her. This whole response took a minute.

I would come to learn that “taking care of her” was actually incredibly ordinary. It was going to King’s Highway grocery store and picking up whole milk and half a dozen eggs. Sometimes it was accompanying her on doctor’s visits, but mainly so I could make sure that we could get in and out of the car easily, which just meant

telling her to hang on and then going around to her side of the car and opening her car door.

It was totally simple, and totally loving.

There's a story that goes like this: Someone once asked the Dalai Lama for help. "I feel so bad," they told him. "I don't feel any kind of compassion for myself." His advice? "Serve others." I have also found this to be true.

And yet sometimes, meditation, like my 'outsider' pose, can be a little self-centered. For the first ten years of my meditation practice, I was so intensely self-preoccupied that there was no way I was really serving others. I was in it for me.

In some ways, that can be helpful in the beginning. We do have to take care of getting to know our own mind and our emotional patterns before we can start seeing how we project our angels and demons onto other people.

Yet at a certain point, there comes a time when we have to take the courageous leap into realizing, "Oh, you matter, too!" In fact, these aren't even two different things. Showing up for others and showing up for one's own life are actually the same.

The simple act of being present with another human being is so moving. What actually matters is showing up to what's happening in front of you and all around you. Showing up for life means showing up for other people, and showing up for people helps us show up for life. This is how we are of service to others and ourselves.

When you think about it, the question, "What do you need?" de-centers the one offering aid so that the one hurting has autonomy. However, we must also be willing to pose this question to all people in a relationship and community. Caregivers and caretakers have needs that shouldn't be ignored or dismissed. We can consider how this question can be used to further interdependence, reciprocity, and the sharing of power in our relationships.

Our Bible Wisdom teachings this morning brought us two different perspectives. While Job asks for nothing, Paul is active. He has requests. He has needs and he makes them known.

"What do you need?" This is such a direct and vulnerable thing to ask. It isn't a limiting question like, "Would you like me to make you a casserole?" It is open-ended, and when we offer this question to another, we do not know how they will respond.

Paul responds with needs, wants, and a desire for justice. The list is long, both in things that Paul wants brought to him and in wrongs he needs to name.

When I was serving another church, I was sitting with a person who was nearing death, and I asked, “What do you need?” They answered, “I need to be healed. I need to feel better.” I couldn’t heal them. I am not sure I made them feel better, but I could be with them. I could witness the desires of their heart.

Paul offers us a moment of intense humility as he opens himself up to share what he needs. The grievances, the stuff—all of it is important, and offering space for folks to respond openly and honestly about what they need is such a sacred act. Keep in mind, our response isn’t some form of paternalism where we quickly judge Paul’s needs and make decisions about whether those needs will really serve Paul. We may of course eventually move to a place in the conversation where we talk about what we can and cannot provide, but we must first trust that person to know what they need. We can respond to someone’s named needs with additions and clarifications, helping them really target the need that caused the specific request to arise, but again, the first step is hearing—fully hearing—what someone’s needs are and discerning how we might respond.

“Paul in Prison” the image is on pg 4 of your bulletin, I really appreciated the artist statement (Rev Lauren Wright Pittman): *Paul’s actions have returned to him. While in a position of power, as Saul, he persecuted people of faith, and now he sits alone at the end of his life, beaten and imprisoned for his own beliefs. It would make sense to me that Paul would be in turmoil, filled with guilt for his former actions, and troubled with resentment. He lists people who have abandoned him, which might have led him to instruct Timothy to right it all. However, Paul chooses another way: “May it not be counted against them!” (2 Tim. 4:16) Perhaps he is able to offer forgiveness because of the blinding forgiveness he himself received... maybe because he forgave himself too.*

What does Paul need at the end of his days? He needs companionship, and he needs it quickly. He needs his cloak to wrap around his battered body and the company of books to keep his imagination engaged. He needs parchments to share his wisdom and to proclaim the Good News. He could’ve passed on bitterness to Timothy, but instead expresses gratitude for God’s provision. I believe the foundational need of this text is the need for forgiveness. Forgiveness transforms Paul’s life. It enables him to seek companionship and comfort instead of vengeance, and it is the essence of the message he carries.

She goes on to describe the piece: *In this block print, I carved Paul writing this letter to Timothy. The lines on his skin echo the twists and turns of his life while the lines on the page give him release. The cell bars obscure the view, however, the light of his halo and the power of his letter cannot be contained. His hand reaches just beyond one of the bars because in receiving forgiveness, reaching out for companionship, and letting go of guilt and resentment, he is free.*

While we’re looking at the art in the bulletin, I appreciate the comments by the artist of the piece on pg 7, which highlights this week’s message. In her commentary, Rev. Lisle

Gwynn Garrity writes, *“In the church I was raised in, the parishioners would fill the refrigerator of the one in trauma with casseroles. A few folks would descend on a home and clean it top to bottom. It was their way of tearing their clothes and rubbing ashes on themselves.”* She goes on to ask, *what are other modern-day practices that might emulate these embodied acts of grief and solidarity?*

In Job, we have a person who has suffered extreme trauma—the trauma of losing his livelihood where his present and future wellbeing are very much in question. We know so many people who are or who have experienced trauma. Trauma, both past and present, impacts every aspect of a person’s life. Job has lost everything – his home, his job, his family. He witnessed his children die a sudden, unexpected death. The loss of a loved one, no matter the circumstances, will impact us, but the impact can be so much sharper when it is unexpected and untimely. Job has suffered physical pain and discomfort—pain that must have seeped deep into his bones. This is very real trauma.

His friends hear of his traumas and head to see him. They offer solidarity in very specific ways. Initially, they react with the proper level of emotion. They match the amplitude of the situation. They are feeling with Job, and by weeping aloud and tearing their robes, are offering Job an outward manifestation that his traumas are indeed very real and worthy of the feelings of the moment. We each have different ways of reacting to trauma and grief. Job’s friends sit with him for days and witness with their very presence the incredible weight of the trauma. Often, we are able to demonstrate our outrage, surprise, grief, and all the rest when we see someone hurting, but we can miss following that up with tangible signs of solidarity. Job’s friends do this well.

How can we show up for one another in ways that both explicitly show that we see the pain of the moment and also that we are not afraid to sit with someone in their pain?

During my training as a social worker, one of my supervisors used the analogy of a person at the bottom of a hole. Our job was not to offer them a rescue line and attempt to pull them out, but to descend into the hole to bear witness to their reality and be with them.

This being with one another is incarnational. It is a sacred act. Every Sunday, we do this. We come together and do this. We witness one another’s existence, traumas, needs, and spend time together. Sacred space and sacred time. Amen.

Again, looking at the image on page 7, you’ll see part of Rev. Garrity’s artist statement. She writes: *If you are hurting right now, may this image remind you: you are not alone. God’s heart is breaking open for you.*

Reflection Questions

- What do you need to feel seen and heard?
- What do you need to feel whole?
- What do you want, prioritize, desire, hope for?