

Job 2:11-13 ~ 2 Timothy 4:9-19

"I've Been meaning to ask... what do you need?"

3rd of 4-part Series: "I've Been Meaning to Ask... a series for curiosity, courage, & connection"ⁱ

June 20, 2021 ~ 4th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Father's Day ~ Juneteenth Weekend

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Introduction to Second Scripture Lesson:

"As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." (2 Timothy 4:6-7). I'm guessing you may have heard that scripture before. It is often read at a funeral or a graveside service: a beautiful testimony and reflection from a person of deep faith who knows their days on earth are about to end.

What you have likely *not* heard, is the scripture that comes right after that. Today's second scripture lesson. It starts with, *"Do your best to come to me soon, for Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me."* You won't see that engraved on a tombstone or embroidered in a counted cross stitch sampler. Yet, we *are* going to see what it can teach us today. It is scripture, in our Bible, just as much as a verse like John 3:16. In this same letter, 2 Timothy chapter 3:16 we are taught, *"All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and training in righteousness."* To plumb the depths of that verse would be another sermon for another day. For now, it challenges us to seek what 2 Timothy 4:9-18 along with our first lesson that Gerri read from Job, have to teach us as we continue our "training in righteousness" now in the 3rd of our 4-week sermon series, "I've been meaning to ask... a series for curiosity, courage, & connection"

We have our work cut out for us, this text sounds more like a hastily scribbled list of random requests and rants from a tired, discouraged, lonely, apostle on his last nerve, as well as his last legs. You may hear a faint echo of the genre in which a religious hero is preparing to pass the torch to the next generation. Our Bible contains several passing the torch speeches from Jacob, Moses, Joshua, and Jesus. We don't know who really wrote this one in 2 Timothy. Although this book is called "The Second Letter of Paul to Timothy," it was most likely *not* written by Paul, several key indicators suggest it was written by a later disciple in the Pauline tradition, reinterpreting and carrying on Paul's message to the third generation of Christians, and beyond. For convenience, I will refer to the writer as Paul in this sermon.

Sermon:

Let's begin with a game that our family used to play called, "Would you rather?" It was actually a favorite of my husband, Bob, who played it with our two girls as they were growing up. And now, it has taken on a new life with our grandpa Bob and three-year old Izzy, who is already full of opinions and preferences. We will just play one round here today. Are you ready? My question is, "Would you rather be the helper, or the "helpee"? That is, be the person who is in a position to help and assist another person in need; or be the person who is having trouble or problems and needs help of one kind of another. Raise your hand, "Would you rather be the helper? Or "would you rather be the helpee"?

Yes! Your hands confirm this truth: I think most of us, would rather be Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar helping out our inexplicably stricken friend Job. And we would rather be Timothy, Luke or Mark coming to the aid of our friend Paul who is in prison and near his dying day. Yes, as much as we prefer to be the helper, it's hard to know how to help. Job's friends do it successfully for seven days. But the more proactive, analytic a problem solver you may be, the harder it is to do what his friends did: show up, offer presence to the person (or persons) in need, and then remain silent as possible and do your best to listen. That can involve a lot of silence, more than most of us are comfortable with.

If you are familiar with the Book of Job, you know his three friends did not remain silent on day eight. For seven days and nights they were extremely helpful, doing exactly what Job needed, staying with him, empathizing with him. Then on the next day, they started trying to explain to Job why his life, his livelihood, and his physical health had totally fallen apart. First round: Eliphaz said it was because Job had sinned, Bildad told Job he should repent, and Zophar said that Job deserved the punishment he was getting. And that was just the first of several rounds where Job's three friends continued to try to come up with reasons for Job's horrendous afflictions.

Earlier this week, I was talking with my sister Lynn about this sermon and the lesson from Job's friends about the need to show up and be present and resist the temptation to fill the silence with the helpee's need to talk, or explain, or "cheer up" the hurting one. To which she wisely and practically pointed out: but when there is distance involved, you kind of have to say something. Sharing silence over the phone or texting or email doesn't work too well.

So what can we say? Let's listen and learn from Kate Bowler. Kate was only 35 years old when she was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer. Out of that life changing, life-challenging experience, she wrote a book titled, *Everything Happens for a Reason*, in which she shared what words actually helped her and can help others when they are having a rough time. Here are 3 of them:

"I am so grateful to hear about how you're doing. Just know that I'm on your team."

You mean I don't have to give you an update? You asked someone else for all the gory details? Whew. Great! Now, I get to feel like you are both informed and concerned...What you have said is amazing, so don't screw it up now by being a nosy Nellie. Ask a question about any other aspect of my life.

"Oh, my friend, that sounds so hard."

Perhaps the weirdest thing about having something awful happen is the fact that no one wants to hear about it. People tend to want to hear the summary, but they don't usually want to hear it from you. And that it was awful. So, simmer down and let your friend talk for a bit. Be willing to stare down the ugliness and sadness. Life is absurdly hard, and pretending it isn't, is exhausting.

Her final one, is our lesson from Job:

******Silence******

The truth is that no one knows what to say. It's awkward. Pain is awkward. Tragedy is awkward. People's weird, suffering bodies are awkward. But take the advice of one man who wrote to me with his policy (which I have rephrased for the pulpit): Show up and keep your trap shut.ⁱⁱ

This teaching applies not only to grown-ups dealing with cancer, but also to teen hurts and issues as well. Any one who has raised a child, knows that meeting the needs of a teen age son is a moving target. Rarely are teens as explicit as Paul was in his letter to Timothy about what they need. Author Tim O'Brien, best known for his book, *The Things They Carried*, wrote a story in his most recent work, *Dad's Maybe Book*, about a revelatory moment when he was trying to help his fourteen-year old son, Timmy, which he titled, "Getting Cut." It goes like this:

"At five feet ten inches, he now looks down on me with the eyes of a grown man,..He values things I never valued. He is confident in ways I am not. Without saying so, he wants me to back off---to stop asking questions about his homework, to stop monitoring his computer time, to stop telling him when to go to bed each night and to stop offering amateurish basketball tips. In a sense I suppose he wants me to stop being a father.

And so...Two days ago, Timmy was cut from his high school's basketball team. It hurt him, yes, but he stayed quiet. He didn't moan. He didn't complain. He blamed no one. He handled failure with a grace amounting to a controlled and elegant beauty.

"Are you okay?" I asked, many times, in a flatly inexpressive voice many times, he said, "I'm fine." Did he cry? I don't know. Did he feel defeated? Did his faith in the power of perseverance collapse? Did he scream at the ceiling? I don't know. Maybe briefly. "Are you okay?" I kept asking, every day, and every day he said, "Fine." He wasn't fine. His bedroom stayed more firmly closed than ever. He was silent at meals. He did his homework, shot baskets alone in the backyard, and plodded ahead with mulish, stone-faced resignation. But he wasn't fine. He still isn't.

Six more days have passed. Timmy's silence remains impenetrable. This morning, when I asked how he was doing, he said, "I probably wasn't good enough. But I don't walk to talk about it." "Not even a little?" "No," he said. "Okay," I told him, "but I'm here to listen." "Thanks," he said... Another week and a half go by... "I asked Timmy if he wanted to watch a Celtic-Cavaliers game. He shook his head and walked away, but a half hour later, he joined my on the couch, gave me a kiss, and said, "There's nothing I can do except keep trying to get better. I won't stop, Dad." "Okay," I said. "I love you," he said.

To receive, unbidden, the words "I love you" from a fourteen-year-old boy makes getting cut seem a weirdly desirable outcome, a thing to be prized. Am I wrong, I wonder, to suppose that fathers everywhere crave what I crave, which is not basketball excellence, not aggressiveness, not speed, not skill, not physical virtuosity, but just a gentle kiss out of nowhere, a quiet "I love you" out of the tight-lipped teenage blue?"ⁱⁱⁱ

I believe there is an important aspect of this helper/helpee dynamic when it comes to doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God, as the prophet Micah teaches us

to do (Micah 6:8). Whether it is white, American well-meaning Christian missionaries imposing their cultural ideals of what another culture needs in the name of Christ; or well-intentioned White people telling People of Color what they need: God calls those putting themselves in the “Helper” role to stop talking. And instead to start listening—no matter how awkward it may be or how long it takes. The call here, is instead to let those who are experiencing injustice tell us what they need. And so, in that spirit, I will let Opal Lee have the final words in my sermon today.

Opal Lee, is a 94-year-old activist and lifelong Texan who has been campaigning to make June 19 a national holiday for years. She experienced a hate crime at age 12 in Fort Worth where a mob of 500 white supremacists set fire to her home and vandalized it. The structure was destroyed, and no arrests were made. Experiencing that hate crime pushed Opal into a life of teaching, activism, and eventually campaigning to get Juneteenth named a national holiday. She walked 2 and ½ miles a day, making her way from Fort Worth, Texas to Washington, D.C, to symbolize the two and a half years that Black Texans were made to wait between Abraham Lincoln’s *Emancipation Proclamation* on Jan. 1, 1863, abolishing slavery, and the day that message arrived in Galveston, where Black people were still enslaved two and a half years later, on June 19, 1865.

What did she need? Here is what she says, “To make people aware that none of us are free until we’re all free, and we aren’t free yet.” She listed the disparities in education, job, health care. And she sees unity as what we need to do to get together and do something about homelessness, about decent housing, decent food, and decent education. “If we could just love one another, you know? If you could get past the color my skin and love me like you do that boy next door to you.”^{iv}

Would you rather be the helper or the “helpee”? Friends, this is actually another false binary. As Opal teaches us, we aren’t free until we are all free. Each of us must be both the “helper” and the “helpee”: together this makes us whole, as individuals and as a society. The truth is: we all share one divine helper. And we can find our unity by living into the truth that all of us need help and all of us can give help. We take one more step toward freedom when we lift up our eyes unto the hills, asking, from whence cometh my help? And knowing in our heart of hearts the answer: My help (our help) cometh from the Lord. (Psalm 121:1-2) Praise be to God.

ⁱ This sermon series idea was created by Sanctifiedart.org, Founding Creative Director, The Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.oprah.com/inspiration/kate-bowler-6-things-to-say-or-not-to-a-friend-in-need#ixzz6yAO7Tp9Q>

ⁱⁱⁱ Tim O’Brien, *Dad’s Maybe Book*, (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: New York, NY, 2019), pp. 309-313.

^{iv} *New York Times*, published June 18, 2020 and updated June 18, 2021, by Julia Carmel.