

Care For The Caregiver

First Reading: Mark 3:7-10

Second Reading: Mark 6:45-46, Mark 1:32-37

One of the great things about our church is all the caregivers. We have so many people who go out of their way to help others, to give them support when they are sick, to hold their hand when they are hurting.

One of the things I noticed when I entered this church for the first time is that there are so many people who reach out—so many who are warm and friendly. And they back up the warmth with accessible and practical support and care. This is what the church is about.

We have a large percentage of people who look after loved ones, not only in the church, but in their extended families. Many in our church have relatives who are limited in their functioning. So they help out any way they can. This is great.

The problem is that being a care giver is taxing because it is hard to know when to say no. There is so much to do and there is something in us that wants to be able to do it all. So caregivers often extend themselves beyond what is reasonable. They look after others needs so much that they start neglecting their own needs. When I sit with parish nurses and other clergy, the issue of boundaries often comes up. The common question is “where do I draw the line?”

Parish nurses talk about how they will be having vacation time with family, then the phone rings. On the other end of the line is someone who desperately needs care. They need a visit in the hospital. And one’s first impulse is to drop the time with family and rush to the hospital. However, when they drop everything and run to the hospital it is difficult on their family. Clergy also talk about getting ready to go out for an anniversary dinner when the phone rings and a member of the church is in the emergency room. How do we balance care giving with time for family? How can we be available to people in crisis in the church and in our extended families and be available for our own selves and our own families? It is a difficult balance to keep. The truth is that many caregivers don’t know how to keep the balance. That is why so many care givers burn out. The burn out rate in care giving professions is very high. The emotional work of being there for people in their time of need is draining.

There have been times in my ministry when feelings came up that I needed to work through but I didn’t have time to address them so I just stuffed them. This made everything worse. Then I was not able to be the kind of minister I wanted to be. It is obvious that when we don’t take care of ourselves we are less effective care givers.

Why is it that we mistreat ourselves, don’t take care of ourselves? There are numerous answers to this question. Our hurried life style and its constant drive to more and more, faster and faster, contributes to a lack of balance. Time management is another big contributing factor. Yet, there is something much deeper. After a lot of soul searching about this I have come to the conclusion that we don’t take care of ourselves because Jesus’ love for us hasn’t sunk in. We don’t take care of ourselves because we don’t let ourselves feel the love God has for us.

Most of us have not come to the profound conclusion that we are thoroughly liked and loved by God just the way we are, with all our shortcomings. And this contributes to myriads of dysfunction, including not taking care of ourselves.

There was a great saint of the early church, Saint Benedict, who claimed that there were three major stages of spiritual development. The first stage is when we love God for our own sake. We love God because it does something for us personally. Then there is the stage when we love God for God's sake. This is when our devotion to God is more about the adoration of God, pure and simple and less tied up with our own needs. Finally, according to Benedict we come to the stage when we love ourselves for God's sake. We love ourselves because we finally feel the love that God has for us.

The message that God loves us before we lose the 30 pounds, before we follow through on the New Years resolutions, and in spite of all our shortcomings does not come easy. In fact it is the graduate course in religious studies. We have so many built in resistances to allowing God's love to sink in. And mistreating ourselves and not taking care of ourselves is a symptom of not seeing ourselves the way God sees us.

When we loosen the grip of self judgment we loosen our judgment of others. When we begin to accept ourselves, we begin to accept others. And the same tenderness that we have towards ourselves, we will have for others.

Secretly most of us carry around self disdain. This comes across in many ways. Not just by mistreating ourselves and not taking care of ourselves. This self disdain is also evident when we isolate ourselves from others, and when we put on our guard and give the impression that we have it all together.

When our idea of God is distant and judgmental we will be the same way towards others. But Jesus came to show us a different way. His understanding of God was radically different. Jesus referred to God as daddy, which was unheard of in his time. Daddy is a term of closeness, intimacy, and tenderness. Our God is like a daddy who loves us tenderly as we are, in our frailty. If we let the tenderness that God has for us in, it softens our hearts. Then we begin to smile at our frailties and to make peace with them. And it is then that we begin to smile at other people's frailties and to make our peace with them. We move from distance and armor to closeness and openness.

If we recognize and absorb Jesus' tender love for us, then the people we care for will feel loved. And that is what people need most from caregivers--to know that they are loved as they are. It is the tender love of Jesus at the heart of the gospel that has the power to transform the life of the caregiver and the lives of those cared for.

This love is what we were created for. All the joy-filled hymns of our faith come from feeling God's love for us. The tenderness of Jesus towards us frees us to accept ourselves as we are and frees us from embarrassment about ourselves. Like the early disciples we are ragamuffins, we are a rag tag band of sojourners who all have baggage of one kind or another. Yet, Jesus loves us tenderly as we are. This is the essence of our faith.

And when it soaks in we will no longer mistreat ourselves. We will take care of ourselves as beloved children. As we care for ourselves in the midst of our frailties, our care for others will be more authentic and sincere. People need to feel God's love for them more than anything else. And only the caregiver who embodies this love and care for the self can do this. We can be vehicles for God's love. This is the essence of ministry in all its forms. We experience God's tender care and acceptance of us as we are, even in the broken places. Then we can extend that same care to others, even in their broken places.

Our scriptures today are about getting away by ourselves to pray. And why should we model Jesus and get away to pray? We do it because it is part of any balanced ministry. We need that time for intimacy with God. And the reason we pray is so the tender love of Jesus will slowly work on us, soften our hearts, and transform us. Experiencing the love of our Abba/our daddy is the essence of Christian prayer. It is through that experience that the love of Jesus will come through us. Our daddy knows us intimately, knows the intentions of our hearts, and knows the broken places. And when we pray to our daddy, he searches us in the silences, in our prayers, and in the scriptures. When his tender love finds us, we are home.

Today I celebrate the care giving in our church. I celebrate all the people who reach out on a regular basis. This is abundant life—to have an open heart and to reach out to people in need. But most of all today I celebrate the way that the God of love shining through the life of Jesus cares for us individually. I celebrate the love of Jesus this morning--the love of Jesus for the caregiver and the love of Jesus for the person cared for. May we experience this love through worship and through the life of prayer. May we experience it and pass it on. May we be balanced and effective caregivers who are rooted in the love of Jesus--who experience it in prayer, then give it away. These are the caregivers who have felt loved tenderly and who love tenderly in return.

In first John 4, verse 19, it says “we love because he first loved us.” We give care because we have first felt cared for. We love tenderly, because we have been loved tenderly. We accept others because we have been accepted.

We celebrate the tender love of Jesus for each and every one of us! This is why we worship. This is why we sing out. This is why we play the piano. This is why we play the flute. This is why we love others. This is why we care. This is why we reach out a hand. This is why we visit the hospital bed. And this is why we take good care of ourselves.

Amen.