

“What Do You Need?”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 20, 2023

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

2 Timothy 4:16-18

Job 2:11-13

This week’s question recognizes that we all have needs and that we need each other. It reminds us that we each have unique needs; we cannot assume to know what is best for others. It also prompts us to reflect on our own priorities, needs and desires, which can sometimes be difficult to discern from one situation to the next.

Job tells the story of an individual who suffers extreme trauma. He loses his livelihood, his health, and even his children – who die a sudden, unexpected death. The loss of a loved one, no matter the circumstances, will impact us – but even more sharply when the loss is untimely and unexpected. Job suffered in profound physical, emotional, and psychological ways; pain that must have seeped deep into his bones. This is very real trauma.

In the midst of Job’s afflictions, three of his friends promptly leave their homes and come to him. They offer solidarity with their friend in very specific ways. Initially, they react with the proper level of emotion, matching the shocking severity of the situation. When they tear their garments and weep loudly, they are offering Job an outward manifestation that his traumas are real and worthy of the feelings of the moment.

With her digital painting, “Break Open,” artist Lisle Gwynn Garrity tries to evoke the emotional impact of rending one’s clothing in solidarity with someone who is hurting. While this ancient cultural practice might seem strange to us now, it represented an embodied way to tear away the protective armor that sometimes guards our hearts so that we can truly show up and join another in their pain.

Later, we are told, Job’s friends sit with him for seven days, saying nothing; giving witness with their presence to the incredible weight of the trauma. Their response is the ministry of presence, of true solidarity, of seeing his excruciating pain and joining him there. Often, we are able to demonstrate our outrage, surprise, and grief when we see another hurting, but we can miss following that up with tangible signs of solidarity. We are prone to get distracted, or fail to fully listen, or

move on to the next crisis and forget the one with ongoing suffering. Job's friends do not.

While Job asks for nothing of his friends, Paul is active in his requests. He has needs and makes them known. Beaten and imprisoned, Paul writes to Timothy with the simple request, back in verse 9: "Come quickly." He then lists those who abandoned him, but says, "I hope that God doesn't hold it against them!" In his greatest moment of need, Paul doesn't desire revenge, but instead asks for companionship. In essence, this is what we all need most: for someone to come quickly, to simply show up.

"What do you need?" This is such a direct and vulnerable thing to ask. It isn't a limiting question like, "I am going to the cafeteria, can I get you some French fries?" Instead, it is open ended; and when we say, "What do you need?" to another, we do not – we cannot – know how they will respond.

Paul responds, in his letter to Timothy, with a long list of things he wants brought to him and with wrongs that he needs to name. Paul offers us a moment of intense humility as he opens himself up to share what he needs. The grievances, the material things – all of that is important, and offering space for folks to respond openly and honestly about what they need is a sacred act. We should not quickly judge these stated needs and make decisions about how or whether those needs are best served. Of course, we may eventually move to a point in the conversation where we talk about what we can and cannot provide, but we first must trust the one we are meeting to know what they need. We can, in time, 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.

As a congregation, we have been seeking to learn more about one another and, as a result, more about the needs of those among and around us. Sometimes, we do this well; other times, we allow ourselves to be distracted and fail to really listen. Conversations are important – whether they take place in bible studies or during fellowship, while painting hallways or packing toiletry bags. As Job's friends remind us, it is important to show up; to invest in the ministry of presence. And as Paul's vulnerable words reveal, we all have needs and we need each other.

Rev. Remington Johnson is a pastor and has, for ten years, been a hospital chaplain in Austin, Texas. I was a student hospital chaplain for one summer, and it

is one of the hardest jobs – and required the most ‘good’ listening – of anything I can imagine doing. She says:

When we ask people about their needs, it’s a really special thing. I would say it’s even a sacred thing because it can connect us into a relationship with one another. Because on both sides of the question, the one asking the question and the one receiving the question, there is intention and consent.

So, if I’m the one asking, “What do you need?” I’m putting myself in place where I don’t know what you’re going to say. Now, of course, I can sort of bracket it. “So, hey – I’m running to the kitchen...Uh, do you need anything?” And then they can answer. And what I’m telling them is, if there’s something in the kitchen, I will grab it for you. If it’s not in the kitchen, I’m not getting it. That’s not on the table of things you can tell me that you need.

But it can also be a very broad, just tell me, “What do you need?” And I don’t know. So it is an act of faith, and curiosity, and respect when I offer that to somebody else.

Now, as the person who is asked that, I also have a choice. I get to say, “Yes.” “No.” “Maybe.” I can choose to enter into this relationship. I can choose to respond. And then I get to choose the level of vulnerability and the depth and the breadth to how I respond.

So, if I’m feeling safe and secure and it’s someone that I know loves me and cares for me, and I’m in the right place, I may respond with a whole litany of things. Everything from, “These are the things that I need from the kitchen when you go get them,” to “These are the existential desires and longings of my soul.” Everything in between.

And I think that’s the really special part about leaning into one another and offering ourselves to listen, because sometimes the thing they want is not found in the kitchen. It’s not found in the French fries. It’s something that can’t happen. I can’t heal your parent that’s been in that bed for two weeks. I can’t fix – overnight – a system that oppresses folks.

And so, sometimes all I can do is witness the fact that you have this need, and I can hear it, and I can hold it, and be another person who knows you have that need. And well, yes, we want the systemic issues with oppression to be wiped away. We want this inbreaking Kingdom. We want things to be beautiful and

wonderful and safe. We want folks to have health and well-being and all the good things. But sometimes we're not in a place to be able to do those.

But it can't stop us from stepping in with intention and faith to lean in and to connect with one another and to ask, "What do you need?" Amen? Amen.