

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Matthew 25: Caring for the Sick
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
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2 Kings 4:32-37; Matthew 25:31-40

She heard a faint knock at her hospital room door. “Come in” she replied. But instead of the door opening, she heard a voice say, “Jamie, how are you doing?” She knew exactly who it was. It was her pastor. “I’m doing better,” she said. “That’s great,” came the voice from the other side of the door. “Would you like a prayer,” the voice continued. “Sure,” Jamie replied. Then the pastor would offer a prayer, say a quick good bye and head off down the hallway. One of the things that happens when you go to a new congregation as the pastor is that you hear stories about your predecessors. This was a story about one of mine in a former church. People said that he was a good preacher, but he had this thing about not being able to go into hospital rooms. In fact, he would have preferred not to go to the hospital at all if it had been possible. Even so, they like him and actually preferred his hospital visits more than that of another pastor they knew. This other pastor would not knock, but would walk in, pull up a chair, put his cowboy boots on the bed and proceed to chat until the cows came home...regardless of how badly the person felt.

I would guess that when it comes to visiting or caring for the sick, most of us are somewhere between these two pastors. For some of us this activity comes naturally, for others it is learned and for many it is something to be avoided. And this is not a criticism. Being with and around those who are ill or those who are dying is not a gift many of us naturally possess. In fact, there are many reasons it could make us uncomfortable. We may be uncomfortable because there may be viruses or germs that could cause us to be ill. We may be uncomfortable because we are unsure what to say or do. We may be uncomfortable because we cannot fix the person and make them better. We may be uncomfortable because death makes us nervous. And this discomfort with being around those who are ill is nothing new. Whether it is in the Old Testament or the New, people avoided the sick as well. They may have avoided them because they believed that their condition was contagious. This would have been the case with leprosy or the plague. They might have avoided someone because they believed that the person was ill because God was punishing them, and being honest, how many of us would want to hang out with someone God does not particularly like? Or they may avoid those who are ill because their illnesses are caused by demons...and let me say that demons in the time of Jesus meant “lesser gods.” What I mean by that is that while Jews believed that YHWH was the highest God, many still believed that there were lesser deities who could interfere in one’s life. This is the case in the Gospel story of the Gerasene demoniac who was inhabited by multiple demons. So, again, who would want to hang out with that kind of a person? Finally, people would avoid those who were dead or dying because to be in contact with a corpse made one, at least temporarily, unclean. And so, across the millennia people avoided being around the ill and the dying. That reality then is what makes our stories this morning so extraordinary.

Let’s begin with our Elisha story. The woman in the story had a long history with Elisha. She had welcomed him into her home, think about last week’s story of welcoming and feeding him. Elisha realizing that she was childless, tells her that like Sarah and Hannah, she would have a child late in life. Her child is

born, but seven years later he dies. Believing that Elisha can do something about this, she grabs a donkey, rides out, finds him and refusing to take no for an answer, shames him into returning with her. When he arrives, Elisha enters the room, which would make him ritually unclean, and prays. Then he lays upon the child, and the child warms. Getting up Elisha walks around the room, bends over the child and the child is revived. Elisha then calls in the woman and returns her child to her. Why God chose to bring this child back to life and chose not to bring others back I cannot say, but once again, what we witness in this story is that God cares for the whole person and their health and wholeness.

Our second story follows suit. As Jesus is teaching about how we ought to act toward others, he tells us that we are to care for the sick. "I was sick, and you took care of me." Remembering the belief that sickness is either the result of God's displeasure or of demonic presence, the affirmation of caring for the sick is again, rather remarkable. It meant putting oneself in harms way. But what I think is critical about Jesus' command is the word he uses for this type of care. I say that because the vast majority of other translations use the term visit. I was sick and you visited me. The implication is that one's obligation is to drop by in the hallway and pass on a prayer, or perhaps put your cowboy boots on the bed and chat. This is a visit. But the Greek word used here comes from the root of *Episcopoi*, from which we get the word, bishop, or shepherd. What this means is that we are not simply to visit the sick and dying, but we are to care for them and about them on God's behalf. We are, in other words, to be God's presence with them. We are to be the embodiment of God's love for them and with them. In other words, this is more than a pop-in visit, it is to seek their welfare as best we can. This reality opens a wide range of possibilities for what it means to care for the ill. It could be praying for them. It could be writing them a note. It could be dropping off a meal. It could be running errands for them. And it could also mean, sitting with them and letting them feel God's presence through our presence. All of these are ways in which we can follow Jesus' command to care for the sick.

This morning there is one more way of caring for the sick which many of us have probably never considered, and that is caring for the dying. To talk more about this, I have invited Sue Bay to speak with us about N.O.D.A., or No One Dies Alone. What is N.O.D.A.? Let me explain. For many people, their last few days or hours of life are spent surrounded by family and friends, where the love of those that they know fills their dying moments. For other people, this is not so. There are those who have no family or friends to be with them, or their family cannot get to their bedside or there is estrangement, or perhaps their death comes so suddenly that no one can travel quickly enough to be present. It is in these cases that N.O.D.A. volunteers become the loving companionship that might not otherwise be present at the time of death.

No One Dies Alone (NODA) provides emotional support to patients who would otherwise be alone at the time of their deaths. Volunteers offer a comforting presence to patients that are expected to pass away within 48-72 hours. Volunteers go through an extensive training program in order to be comfortable with sitting with those who are dying and to be present with a clear mind and an open heart. The volunteers are on call for service, usually serving two hour shifts which may involve holding the hands of the patient, soothing rubs of arms or foreheads, reading aloud, playing soothing music, and saying reassuring words. Persons interested in learning more about NODA or becoming a volunteer at Beaumont Royal Oak, may contact Kevin Hickey at 248-551-1338 or by email at kevin.hickey@beaumont.org.