

Needing Help

Rev. Jennifer Gleichauf

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One of the things I like about church is the ways we help each other. We take each other meals, offer rides and prayers to other church members. The other church members may be people we know well or maybe someone we've never met. We don't agree to help based on whether we like the person or agree with the person. We don't agree to help thinking that the person we help now owes us something. We do it because it's what it means to belong here.

As the person who often coordinates this help, it is heartening to see that there are usually plenty of people who will volunteer to be the helpers. Lots of you who will gladly bring a meal, drive someone, say a prayer, send a card, hold a hand.

What I hadn't known when I was a new minister was just how much convincing I'd have to do to get folks to accept help. Some of you know who you are. Quite often, someone will be going through something difficult – a surgery, a loss, whatever it may be – and I say, why don't you let us drop off some meals? And people will say "oh no, I'm fine" or "I've got some food stored up" or "I can just order food in" or a bunch of other reasons for why they do not need help. Sometimes they won't budge. Other times I can get them to take help if I twist their arms a bit. Sometimes I must remind people that they have done lots to help other people and so it is ok to receive some help in return - to think of it as a trade. Sometimes I convince people that the helpers like to help so much that they are doing the helpers a favor by letting them help. Sometimes I just say "well, we are doing it anyway, so there." (not really, but I do sometimes think about setting up anonymous porch drops of food).

But, when I am honest, I know I also do not like asking for help. I prefer to be independent and self-sufficient, and all those good words we Americans love. Nadia Bolz Weber says it this way: "we are so ashamed of needing help that we invented an entire genre of literature called *self-help*. The very name is the tell, isn't it? Needing help is fine, as long as it comes from you. But needing it from somewhere else? ...from God, from community, from mercy you did not earn and cannot possibly pay back? that just smells strongly of victimhood.

Yet, just as a reminder, ‘God helps those who help themselves’ is not found in the Bible. Yet ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’ actually is. ...for those of us who have been raised on self-reliance and the American Gospel of Meritocracy, that pill doesn’t go down so easy. We tend to assign blame to those in need of what Jesus offers.”¹

In other words, we see the need of help from others at worst as a weakness or at best a burden.

Which brings me to today's scripture.

First, we hear about how Jesus experiences a great compassion for the crowds. The Greek word is *splagchnizomai* which means a compassion that comes from somewhere deep in the gut. Jesus saw them and felt it: *harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd*. Not a crowd. Not a problem to be managed. People who needed help.

And Jesus realized he couldn’t get to all of them, all those lost sheep, by himself. He needed help. Jesus needed help. That’s worth noting first. Even Jesus needed help. He had been all over the place - every town and village - and he had been healing and teaching and connecting with the crowds, but there are too many of them for just one man, even when that man is Jesus.

So, who should he get to help? The answer to that tells us something important. Jesus didn’t send the educated priests or Pharisees who had a lot of knowledge and experience being helpers. He didn’t send rich men who could comfortably stay in nice inns and eat at restaurants along the way. He sent the disciples. The most ordinary of men. They were men who were willing to follow, but there wasn’t much else special about them. It isn’t like they went through some extensive training program. Heck, Matthew the tax collector was just recruited a few verses ago. No, they were twelve ordinary people. Twelve ordinary people who, importantly, knew what it meant to be outcasts or poor or ignored. These were men who knew what it was to need help. Men who had needed help themselves. Men who knew something about being open to receiving mercy and healing and grace because they’d followed Jesus around some.

¹ https://thecorners.substack.com/p/i-am-in-need-of-help?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=23733&post_id=201061539&utm_campaign=email-post-title&isFreemail=true&token=eyJ1c2VyX2lkIjo1MTAzMDA3NywicG9zdF9pZCI6MjAxMDYxNTM5LCJpYXQiOjE3ODA5MDQzNDAsImV4cCI6MTc4MzQ5NjM0MCwiaXNzIjoicHVlLTlzMzZliwic3ViljoicG9zdC1yZWJjdGlvbij9.I-04Qai1b0EEsRUWzjurwKOiQSCo4yyKBygb4Ema3Qc&r=udr25&triedRedirect=true&utm_medium=email

People who have received help themselves are often some of the best people at giving help. Some of that is that you just don't know what you don't know until you know. Even having been in ministry for 20 years and coordinating help and being with people when they are going through hard things a lot, I really experienced what it is to have people offer help in a new way when my dad died two years ago. I wouldn't have said I wanted anything: any help, any attention, but I decided I needed to practice what I preach and just let the help come without trying to control or stop it. And then when the cards came in and all kinds of people showed up for the funeral to give me a hug and food arrived on my doorstep and people quietly shared with me their own knowing of that grief, it was such a powerful experience of receiving help and mercy and love, that it deepened my own understanding of what it is to receive help. Rather than feeling like I might have expected, like it was some kind of weakness or burden, I felt it as Jesus' presence coming alongside me in tangible ways. I have often felt that as a Christian my role was to be the giver, the helper, the hands of God in the world, but in receiving help during that deep grief, I saw something new about what it is to be a follower of Jesus.

Bolz Weber puts it this way: "needing help, needing forgiveness, needing consolation, hope and healing *because you cannot muster these up in sufficient quantity for yourself* ...is not a failure in the Christian life. It is a factory installed feature of the Christian life— it's actually the whole design...

Which means that while some will try and tell you that to be in "right relationship with God" is to make yourself so well that you are never in need of healing waters. But the right relationship between God, the giver of all good things, the font of every blessing and us – is for God to offer provision and for us to be the receivers of God's gifts and mercies."²

Which is why, when Jesus sent the disciples out, he told them not to take payment. There were many healers of the time who would travel from village to village offering healing in exchange for payment. But Jesus wanted to make clear that the healing the disciples offered was a gift of God, not a transaction. The disciples themselves had received healing and now they were offering it to others.

² https://thecorners.substack.com/p/i-am-in-need-of-help?utm_source=post-email-title&publication_id=23733&post_id=201061539&utm_campaign=email-post-title&isFreemail=true&token=eyJ1c2VyX2lkLjo1MTAzMDA3NywicG9zdF9pZCI6MjAxMDYxNTM5LCJpYXQiOjE3ODA5MDQzNDAsImV4cCI6MTc4MzQ5NjM0MCwiaXNzIjoicHVlLTlzMzZliwic3ViljoicG9zdC1yZWJjdGlvbij9.I-04Qai1b0EEsRUWzjurwKOiQSCo4yyKBygb4Ema3Qc&r=udr25&triedRedirect=true&utm_medium=email

Much like the pay-it-forward coffee lines we hear about in the news where people pay for the person behind them, but in this case, with much bigger stakes. It was important that the people the disciples went to recognize God in their work and learn that God's love and healing is not for sale or barter.

However, Jesus also tells the disciples to go empty handed. Don't bring money or food or even a bag. Just go to the people who need help. Which means that while they are going out to offer help, they will also need to depend on the help of others to house and feed them. But rather than it be in a transactional way, Jesus is clear that this is about creating relationship. To heal people or cast out demons or anything else, you have to first see people and get to know them, to know what it is they need. And if you are also going to need some of your needs met, you'll have to be willing to share a bit about yourself – no one is going to take you in and feed you without feeling they can trust you at least a bit.

That's the key to giving and receiving help – relationship. Without it you end up with all kinds of unintended problems. Without relationship you end up doing things that people don't need or want. You take a meat casserole to the vegetarian family because you didn't ask about food preferences, or your mission trip team wants to build something so a community makes up a project for you to build but then just tears it down when you leave and you never asked what they really needed; or you sit down with a friend to listen but turn the time into telling them about something similar that happened to you and giving advice they weren't asking for, because that is easier than just listening. At the food pantry it looks like when we get a bunch of donations of mac and cheese but have no milk or butter to give with it. Relationship is what allows the giver to understand the need better and helps the receiver be willing to be vulnerable enough to ask for what they really need.

It is also in relationship where we grow our capacity for compassion. It is easy to imagine people as lazy or dumb or unworthy from a distance or through quick stories on the news or the internet. But proximity and relationship usually put an end to that kind of thinking. Knowing someone personally, hearing their story, understanding how they got into a situation, all of that builds our compassion.

Which means that what we are doing here, in this congregation, when we bring meals and offer rides and send cards and sit with each other — we are not just being nice. We are practicing the kingdom of God. We are being, together, what Jesus sent those twelve ordinary people out to be. Not experts. Not self-sufficient.

Not the ones who have it all together. Just people who have received something they didn't earn and can't pay back, passing it on to someone else who needs it.

But that only works if we are willing to be on both ends of it.

So here is my invitation to you today: the next time someone from this community offers to help you — a meal, a ride, a prayer, a hand to hold — try something different. Instead of "oh I'm fine" or "I've got it covered," try just saying yes. Not because you are weak. Not because you are a burden. But because saying yes is an act of faith. It is admitting that you are not self-sufficient, that you were never meant to be, that needing help is, as Bolz-Weber says, a factory-installed feature of the Christian life. It is the whole design.

Because all the things I tell people are really true: when you allow people to give, you give them the gift of being needed; when you allow people to give, it is not a transaction where you now are on the hook and owe them, or a burden, but a gift. And, if you've been someone who is always on the giving end, allowing yourself to receive help you may just find that Jesus is present in the hands of the very ordinary people who show up at your door and that being loved in your need is not the bottom of the Christian life, but closer to the heart of it.

This is who we are. Ordinary people, with our own needs, doing our best to show up for each other, which turns out to not be very ordinary at all.

Amen.