

April 6, 2014

The National Presbyterian Church

Caring Enough . . . to Receive

Mark 5:21-43

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In our sermons through the season of Lent; the weeks that lead up to Holy Week, to Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter, we are thinking together about the ministry of caring – the call of the church of Jesus Christ and the call of our own congregation to be a caring community, to be the arms and the feet and the hands and the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ; to care for others now, in this world, through our flesh and blood just as Jesus cared for people back then 2000 years ago in his flesh and blood.

- We've been thinking about caring, not just as an emotion of the heart but as an action that we take, as we thought together about four friends, for example, who carried their paralyzed friend to Jesus. In his time of need those friends bore him to the one who could be his helper and his savior.
- We've been thinking together about caring in terms of doing nothing but listening but doing listening is not doing nothing; listening to others when others need to be heard.
- We've been thinking about caring through our prayers for others because we believe that God hears our prayers. We may have no clue how the God of the universe incorporates those prayers into his plans and purposes and touches countless lives through them but the scriptures assure us that God does precisely that and that our prayers for others matter.
- And we've been thinking about caring in terms of comfort – walking alongside somebody in their time of loss or grief or change, sometimes listening, sometimes speaking, sometimes holding a hand, sometimes hugging another – being there for another in time of change.

Today as we continue to think about the caring ministry of the church I want us to turn the tables around a little bit and to spend some time thinking not so much about what we can do for others as about what others can do for us. Not so much about what we give to others but what we can receive from others – our willingness or our unwillingness to let others take care of us in our moment of need; and all of us, of course, have such moments.

When we are children we all realize that we are in need. As children we're helpless. As children we come into this world and the first thing we do is to cry out for somebody else to pay attention to us, to feed us, to hug us, to lift us up, to embrace us; and this is from the very beginning, without any shame or embarrassment. A baby knows that they cannot make it by themselves and that they need somebody else. And while they may fight with that sense of

dependence as they grow older, that is the fundamental truth of childhood. So adults develop a system of education for us as children, in which those who have gone before us share their knowledge with us, share their skill with us, share their character with us. And, as those dependent on others, we grow not only in stature but in all kinds of different ways; but only as we pay attention to those who can help us when we cannot help ourselves; only as we receive help from others who long to share what they know or have experienced with us.

When we *do* this, remarkable things happen! When we *don't* do this, remarkable things happen or don't happen! In my childhood I tried to learn two different instruments: the violin and the piano. I failed at both, for one simple reason: I didn't listen to my mother and I didn't listen to my teachers. I didn't stay the course of listening repeatedly to what they had to share, watching as they sought to help me develop a skill that I now wish that I had. How critical that role is – not only of helping but of being willing to receive help.

In the mid-1990s the *Big Brother Big Sister* organization conducted a survey to see how effective their programs were in helping young through the presence of a mentor and a friend, somebody in a life to whom a child, a young person could go. They discovered something remarkable. That if children were mentored by somebody else, an adult coming into their lives to care for them, compared to a control group they were 46% less likely to be using illegal drugs in the days ahead, 27% less likely to begin using alcohol, 52% less likely to skip school, 37% less likely to skip a class, and 33% less likely to hit someone. The impact of that other life, and of a person's willingness to allow their life to be changed, influenced, helped or advised by that other life, was simply huge. (<http://evidencebasedprograms.org/1366-2/117-2>).

But the trouble is that we tend to “grow up”! And as we grow up we very often – not always but very often – find it much harder to be open to receive help from other people. We tell ourselves that we're now adults, and we can do it ourselves. And there's something to be said for that. But even when it's perfectly clear that we need help, the other side of the coin is that very often we are not willing to be receivers in time of need.

When I was in seminary there were many young families with children. And we had a wonderful network of giving and receiving help, especially when babies were born. The group had a coordinator who did a marvelous job at bringing people together, so that we could both take and give, so that we could be blessed in the giving and in the receiving. But a little problem arose along the way. Not a major problem but just a little problem, though it led to some awkwardness. What we discovered was that the coordinator was unwilling to receive help herself! She was just as needy as the rest of us. There were times in her life with her young family when she needed help, but she would say ‘oh no, no, I don't need it.’ And the impact of that was greater than she realized. It made the rest of us feel as if we were just a step down from

her, as if we were being patronized, as if she was not a part of this group of receiving and giving but was somehow one step, or two steps up! – just a little bit stronger or better than the rest of us.

When caring works best, it is always a mixture of giving and receiving. We need to be willing to do both, and if we are not then things go wrong. Sometimes in a trivial way, and sometimes in ways that are more serious.

On the trivial front (well, at least sometimes it's trivial) I have been assured by one of my secret sources that there is some truth to the stereotype that men don't like to "receive help (that is, take directions) when they're driving a car! And when they turn down the wrong way and they can't quite get back on track, that they are unwilling, especially from the person who may be sitting in the seat beside them, to receive any firm direction as to where they ought to be going at that time. Even though this unwillingness to be helped might lead to the embarrassment of being late! even though it may lead to an excess of greenhouse gasses because you traveled 20 miles instead of 10 miles! even though there may be squabbles in the car which may take a while to get over! Trivial, perhaps, but there it is – the ramifications of the willingness or unwillingness to take advice.

On a more serious note though, sometimes things can go really wrong when people aren't willing to receive advice from others. In August 2011 in Marshall, Texas for example 62 year old Pedro Rodriguez was killed when he drove his car onto Interstate 20 the wrong way, going down the wrong side of the Interstate. He was not only killed, but 42-year old Kevin Jones was killed as well as Pedro Rodriguez rammed his car head on into Kevin's car. Earlier in the day, it emerged in the investigation, Pedro had been drinking, all day, and his friends had told him not to get in his car. But he had not listened to that advice. And then sadder than that – 40 minutes before the accident itself, and recorded on a video in a police car, a trooper had spoken to him (hadn't arrested him, hadn't taken his car away. I'm not quite sure why that didn't happen but it was on the video), and had told him not to get back in the car and drive. But Pedro didn't listen. Instead, he got into the car and drove the car to his death and to the death of another.

It can be trivial but it can be serious – we begin to have trouble with some aspect of our life. It could be with alcohol. It could be with drugs. It could be with pornography. It could be with gambling. It could be with finances. It could be with our marriage. It could be with a project at work . . . and we're stumbling, we're stuck. We don't know how to move forward. We procrastinate. We need help. It's obvious to everybody else that we need help, BUT we decide that we're just not going to take that step. We're going to live with that problem, even when our own health, our own joy is at stake! Or when the health and welfare of others is at stake too.

Sadly, this is particularly true in the whole arena of mental health. Some people estimate that between 10 to 15% of Americans (we have about 700 folks here in worship in our different services on a Sunday morning which means that 70 to 100 of you all) suffer some form of serious depression. And the consequences are significant, affecting not only ourselves but others. They range from personal pain to a sense of being in a tunnel or a hole or a dark place that

you cannot get out of, to missing work, to marriages that are broken, to health issues (near the top of them diabetes); all coming from that experience of depression. And here's the stunner: Even though modern treatment has proved to be highly effective in almost 70% of the cases of depression, the saddest truth of all is that 2/3 of those who suffer from depression never seek appropriate treatment at all! They don't go for help. Instead we say to ourselves "I'm a big boy," or "I'm a big girl. I'm no longer a child. I can tough this out. It's not as bad as all that. I'll give it time. I'll snap out of it. I don't want to take medication. I'm too embarrassed to even raise the topic. I'm afraid that somebody else may find out what I'm going through." And with those thoughts in mind we suffer needlessly and very often somebody else suffers with us. <http://www.webmd.com/depression/features/depression-why-arent-you-getting-treatment>;

In fact as human beings as we leave childhood behind we can become experts in allowing our fears to control our lives and to destroy our lives, or, at the very least to take away from our lives that level of living to which God has called us.

The fear of being a burden (we say, "I just, just don't want to be a burden to anybody else," even though the scriptures tell us in Galatians 6:2, that we're to "*bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.*"). The fear of rejection or embarrassment (a sense of stigma), the fear of not feeling safe if we share our little secret, or the fear of seeming weak or incapable or the fear of losing control.

And some of these fears, well, there's something to them. There are some times when we share something with somebody else, some weakness or some need, where the person we share with begins to take over, runs straight into our lives and takes over. This can happen. There are times in which we've got what I might call "a five dollar problem" and somebody turns it into a "five million dollar problem." And so now our problem becomes the person who's trying to help us!

It can get out of hand. I know that. But nevertheless when we are in need, there are often more good resources to help us than we can ever imagine. And even within the fellowship of the church those resources exist – and our calling is to make sure that the appropriate resources exist so that in our time of need we can ask and receive and not just give.

The scriptures are clear on this front that as those who come to know God through Jesus Christ, we have been called to be not only givers but receivers. In the book of Ecclesiastes (4:13) we read these words: '*better is a poor and wise child than an old and foolish king who no longer will take advice.* And in the book of Proverbs

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes. But he that listens to counsel is wise (12:15)

There is a way that appears to be right but in the end it leads to death (14:12)

and this simple commandment: *Be not wise in your own eyes.* (3:7)

Be not wise in your own eyes: always seek the eyes and advice of someone else. In our passage of scripture, from Mark Chapter 5, there are three key figures. And they are bound together in this one chapter by the fact that *all of them realize they are people in need who are willing to seek help when they need it.*

There is the woman with the hemorrhage. For 12 years she has had this hemorrhage. She's been to doctors and they can do nothing with her. They have taken her money and now she has nothing. The whole thing is highly embarrassing and it's not only embarrassing but to have this blood associated with your life in the ancient world was to be ritually impure, and thus to be cut off from a close relationship with God. If there was anybody who had the right to say: "I've had enough. I'm not going to get any more help. This is how life is going to be. I refuse to be disappointed any more by anybody else," – it could have been this woman. But in her weakness she was strong enough to keep on seeking help.

And then there's Jairus, the leader of the synagogue, caring for his daughter. Sometimes caring for another enables us to be more humble, more help-seeking, than we would be otherwise. But nevertheless this man was a leader of the community. He had a position in the community. Jairus was the kind of person who had to be careful about what other people thought about him. As the "leader of the synagogue" he needed to think twice before becoming willing to humble himself and go to Jesus for help. Keep in mind that Jairus was part of the establishment, Jesus was not. Jesus was just a carpenter's son from Nazareth. He was not ordained. He hadn't been trained. People would talk! – Who is *this* man, Jesus, to give help? How come Jairus would humble himself before *this* man? But he did. And in doing that he found the help that he needed.

And then there's the demoniac whose story is slightly different. The first step in this story is of Jesus – not the demoniac; not the "care receiver" – coming towards the demoniac crossing the Sea of Galilee to his side, making the journey to be with him (actually that's the invisible truth in all of these stories: that Jesus is the one who always takes the first step, and he's always closer to us than we at first can imagine. Sometimes we see him sometimes we don't but he is there). But having taken that first step, when Jesus gets out of the boat on the other side of the sea of Galilee in the region of the Gerasenes, this man whom he meets called a demoniac who has all kinds of problems, he hurts himself and he hurts other people and then he cannot live in society with other people, he comes running to Jesus and he bows down before him. The word in Greek for "bow down" is *proskuneo*, which also means "worship." In other words, he bows down in absolute humility before Jesus, as if to say, "Strong as I am, I need, I desperately need, your help . . . even though I have this feeling that the cure might be painful at first: I don't want the pain of the cure, but I do want the cure." And he comes to Jesus for help in this moment of need.

It is this willingness to be humble that binds these Mark 5 characters together, and this image, especially of the demoniac, is powerful when it comes to understanding the Christian faith. Here he is, running to Jesus, bowing down before him, worshiping him, seeking his help! And isn't this what binds us together as Christians? The fact that we come before God not as

those who are righteous, not as those who are moral, not as those who are better than others, but *as those who know we need the help of God made known in Jesus Christ*, who comes to us as our Lord and our Savior to give us the help that we cannot find in ourselves. Our sin is too strong. We are too weak. We need a Savior. We need to . . . receive . . . we are children of God and we are to be child-like in receiving the help that we need.

It is true, of course, that the scriptures tell us that Jesus once said it is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). But the truth is also this: that if we are to be givers, if we are to be givers of care, if we are to be givers of time and energy and ears and prayers and comfort to others, we must first of all have the internal resources to keep on giving. We have to be receivers first. If we are to keep on giving, if we are to give without being patronizing, if we are to understand the true needs of somebody else as we give, we must be receivers first.

When Jesus stepped out of the boat immediately a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit met him. When he saw Jesus from a distance he ran and bowed down before him. The demoniac was a receiver in time of need.

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and when he saw him fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly he was willing to be humble enough, strong enough to receive.

Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for 12 years. She had endured much under many physicians, had spent all that she had, she was no better but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak for she said if I but touch his clothes I will be made well – Willing to receive. Caring enough to receive.

May God help us who seek to be givers first of all to be receivers. Let us pray.

Let Us Pray: Holy God we are still before you as we gather for worship Sunday by Sunday we come as those in need of help. Help us to see those parts of our lives perhaps to which we are blind. We need more help than we know and help us to find the help that we need. Amen.

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