

Presence as Incarnation: What do you need?
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“I’ve Been Meaning to Ask” series, 4

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*Grace and peace to you in God who has created us, redeemed us,
and sustains our lives. Amen.*



Last weekend I got sick.

It may have been a stomach bug, or something I ate, but I was not well.
On Saturday, a number of volunteers gathered here
to put the sanctuary back together after the carpet cleaning –
and there were not donuts, as promised.
Sunday morning I had to call on various people to step in and make worship
happen without me – and as I said to Steve – it is not easy for me to ask for help.
I don’t like it. But –
If I never needed help, maybe I would never see what a great community
we have here, ready to step in and make it happen –
maybe I wouldn’t recognize that you all’ve got my back.
And you do that for one another as well, in big and small ways.
As Steve said to me last weekend, we have a village.
And I’m so grateful.

The theme this week for our series on relationship and connection is
What do you need?
It’s a vulnerable question –
Vulnerable to answer honestly, because for many of us, it’s challenging
to even be able to name what we need, and more challenging to share it
And it’s vulnerable to ask, because I may not be able to help,
to provide what it needed, and that’s a difficult feeling as well.
But it’s important to ask, of ourselves and others,
and it’s important to answer honestly, with ourselves and the people we trust
Last week, we looked at how important it is to see and honor
one another’s pain and struggle – and this is the same.
To hear, to see, to honor our needs and the needs of others –
even when we can’t meet those needs or make it better – is an act of care.



Today we read from the book of Job –

one of the most challenging books in the bible

If you remember the first chapter of Job, it is a fable or parable, which tells of how God allows the *Satan* – God’s DA or advocate – to test Job’s faithfulness with a series of trials.

Job loses his wealth, his children, and his health, in quick succession.

The bulk of the book depicts Job and his friends wrestling with the question of why we suffer, especially why we suffer unjustly.

But before all those chapters of talk and debate and lament,

Job’s friends come and sit with him.

Last week I talked about the ministry of presence – the act of just showing up to be present with another person in their suffering.

That is what Job’s friends offer.

They show up – they tear their clothes in the ritual of mourning – and they sit with him for seven days.

It is a beautiful moment of solidarity and love –

which starts to go wrong when they open their mouths to speak.

Perhaps that is first and best lesson of Job’s friends –

there is a reason God gave us two ears and one mouth.



This image was created for the story by the Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity

It is called Break Open, and it depicts the moment of tearing one’s clothing in grief. The artist shares this story:

The day my grandmother died, my mother-in-law called. My grandmother died peacefully in old age, and yet, my mother-in-law knew the significance of her loss. She knew how my grandmother had helped raise my sister and me when our mother died when we were young. She knew that my grandmother was the matriarch of my large extended family, and that her death would usher in a new reality for us. She knew that my grief for my mother—well-worn and familiar—would bleed into this new, unfamiliar grief. She knew that losing my grandmother would feel like losing a parent all over again.

I missed her call, but she left a voicemail. Softly, her voice message began: “Lisle, I just heard about your Nana...” Then her voice cracked, she sighed,

and began to weep. After a few moments of weeping quietly, she found her words again: “Anyway, I love you. Call me if you want to talk.”

I don’t remember much of what others have said to me in the fresh fog of grief, but I will never forget that.

In a way, she didn’t need to ask me what I needed. Without assumption or question, she simply entered into my pain and joined me there. Her profound act of solidarity gave me great comfort when little comfort was to be found.

Rev Garrity continues,

In this image, I wanted to evoke the emotional impact of rending one’s clothing in solidarity with someone who is hurting. While this ancient cultural practice might feel curious to us now, I love that it’s an embodied way to tear away the armor that guards our own hearts so we can truly show up—tenderly—to join another in their pain.

If you are hurting right now, may this image remind you: you are not alone. God’s heart is breaking open for you.



When our weekly bible study gathered on Thursday, we talked about this physical act of rending one’s clothing, and we asked –

what are the rituals of grief and care we practice here and now?

We came up with very few.

We have funeral services, send cards and flowers.

Many working people have only 3-5 days of bereavement leave –

hardly enough to hold a funeral and do all the business of death,
let alone give the heart and spirit space to grieve.

We live in a culture that doesn’t lean in with *What do you need?*

We live in a culture that leans away from grief and sickness and pain,
hoping each person will take care of themselves and not be a burden.

For most of us, that is what we expect of ourselves as well.



But humans aren’t created to be alone.

Remember that lesson from Genesis?

Humans are created for interdependence, for community and care.

One thing we all need as people is community –

Friends, family, church, school, workplace or social space –

We all need someplace where we are seen and known and cared for.

Hospital chaplain Remington Johnson writes in her commentary on the reading from Job,

During healthcare chaplain training, one of my supervisors would use the analogy of a person at the bottom of a hole. Our job was not to offer them a rescue line and attempt to pull them out, but to descend into the hole to bear witness to their reality and be with them.

I like this analogy of climbing into the hole – and – it makes me uncomfortable.
I know I've also heard the advice that when faced with someone in addiction,
in trauma, in the confusion of grief, we don't want to get into the hole with them
I think it's a matter of keeping our own line up and out of the hole,
so that we join someone with our presence in their pain,
but we don't get stuck there with them.
Because there are other needs we can meet – offering resources, prayers,
casseroles and drives to the doctor and child care –
but only if we keep our own way up out of the hole.
What good would I be as a chaplain to people who have lost a loved one,
if I wasn't willing to climb down with them into their loss and grief?
And, what good would I be if I got stuck there with them,
and couldn't answer their questions
and advocate for them with officers on the scene?



Chaplain Johnson continues in her commentary,
This being with another is incarnational. It is a sacred act. Every Sunday, we do this. We come together and do this. We witness one another's existence, traumas, needs, and spend time together. Sacred space and sacred time.

Incarnation. It's the word we use to describe how Jesus showed up for us.
How God was and is present for us in the world.
Incarnational. It's a word for how we can show up for each other,
bearing the love of Christ in a world in such need of that love.
What do you need?
First, we need love – and God has given it to us.
Thanks be to God. Amen.