

The Spirituality of Presence

R.G. Wilson-Lyons

The writer Wendell Berry says, “There are no unsacred places. There are only sacred and desecrated places.” The truth of the matter is that God is everywhere – God is just as much present in your home or in your work or on a beach or in a factory as God is in this church. Sometimes, we just need the awareness to grasp God’s presence with us. That’s one of the reasons we chose St. Patrick’s prayer as our call to worship today – to name that Christ is behind and before and above and beneath – that Christ’s presence is always before us and behind us and with us.

Living into the awareness of God’s presence along with a truthful awareness of ourselves is the work of spirituality, and, perhaps nothing is more important for us in this time right now than reclaiming a sense of spiritual grounding and practice because there are many desecrated places in our world. Seemingly every year, somewhere in our world experiences the “worst hurricanes in 500 years” and we know the incredibly scary projections of the impact climate change will continue to have on the Earth. We are living in a time when news of mass shootings are an all too common occurrence. We live in a time when white supremacy and global fascism seem to be on the rise. And we hear news report of Vladimir Putin threatening to use tactical nuclear weapons. And sometimes, it is so tempting to throw our hands up and say, “What’s the use?”

And that is precisely why we need to be spiritual people.

The writer and theologian Richard Rohr says, “It is in working for outer freedom, peace, and justice in the world that we have to discover an even deeper inner freedom just to survive in the presence of so much death.”

Today, we begin our *Spirituality of* sermon series where we will explore various spiritual practices that can ground us on a foundation of hope. This week, we are talking about the spirituality of presence. Joseph Bayly, a Christian writer and seminary professor, was the parent of seven children. But Joseph and his wife, Mary Lou, suffered every parent’s worst fear – three of their children died while they were still children. After his second child died, Bayly wrote these words: “I was sitting torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God’s dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly, he said things I knew were true, I was unmoved, except to wish he’d go away. He finally did. Another came and sat beside me. He didn’t talk. He didn’t ask leading questions. He just sat beside me for an hour and more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply, left. I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go”

Being present with people in the midst of pain is both one of the most important gifts we can offer someone and also one of the most difficult. As humans, most of us have a tendency to try to fix pain or to try to explain pain or to do or say something that will make the pain go away.

Now, when it is possible to do or say something to make pain go away, by all means we should. But most pain is not that simple. Most pain only lessens with time, and in those situations, our challenge is to resist the temptation to jump to platitudes, to resist the temptation to think that we can speed up the process of healing. The challenge is to simply be present with others in the midst of their pain – to not tell them everything will be ok, to not try to provide theological explanations for their pain, to simply be there.

This struggle of being present in the midst of pain is as old as human existence. The book of Job is one of the earliest writings of Scripture we have and it deals with this very question – what causes human pain and what is a helpful response to pain. Job was a wealthy man with a beautiful family, a righteous family, but he ended up losing everything – crops, barns, children, he even developed painful sores all over his body. And in the midst of his pain, three of his friends came to see him.

Our Scripture we read earlier comes from selected passages from the first four chapters of Job. At the beginning Job's friends choose to simply sit with him in his pain. Then Job speaks and curses the day of his birth and comes pretty close to cursing God though he ultimately refrains. That's when his friends can hold their tongues no longer. They say, "Think now, who that was innocent ever perished?

Or where were the upright cut off?"

Being blamed for your pain is not exactly the most comforting thing to hear. But first, let's point out that Job's friends love him; they have the very best of intentions. I mean they sat in silence with him for 7 days. If you've ever sat with someone who is suffering for a long time, you know that is not an easy task, but it is precisely what is needed. They began by simply being present and that gift of presence I think is what ultimately allowed Job to express his pain and anger. Job wanted to die and he named that. He goes on to blame God for his pain – saying that God was not being fair with him. And those two sentiments are not considered "appropriate" things to say – not then – not now.

When someone tells us they want to die or when someone blames God for their suffering, it is so tempting for us to interject, to tell them they shouldn't feel that way. That kind of language has a way of making most of us uncomfortable – it certainly made Job's friends uncomfortable and that is when they decided to speak. It's interesting that they only decide to speak after Job curses the day he is born and blames God. In that moment, they shift from trying to comfort Job to trying to defend God. In essence, they want to censure how Job expresses his pain because the way Job chose to do so either offended them or at least made them uncomfortable.

To be present with someone means that it is not our job to tell them what they should or shouldn't feel or should or shouldn't say. It is simply to sit with them, to listen to them, if for nothing else than to be a physical presence to hear them rage, or maybe even be a recipient of that rage of that expression of pain.

Fortunately, Job is in good company in expressing his pain in ways that may not be for polite company. Many of the Psalms express the depths of human emotion, completely uncensored. And Jesus himself, hanging from the cross cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Even Jesus accused God of abandoning him.

So let me point out two things: first, if you are in a place of pain or if you ever will be in a place of pain (and we all will be), you don’t have to censure yourself. If you need to rage, rage. If you need to blame God, blame God. God is big enough to take it, and unlike Job’s friends, God will not try to tell you what you should or shouldn’t feel or should or shouldn’t say.

And secondly, if you are with a loved one who is in pain, remember that the greatest gift you can offer them is to simply be there – to see their pain without looking away – even when it makes you uncomfortable. That, after all, is the greatest gift that God gave us. For whatever reason, God did not remove pain from human existence, but instead, God became human in the person of Jesus, God became present with us. To be present with others is to model the love of Christ who came to be present with us. This is why the practice of simply being present is not just a good thing to do, but it is a deeply spiritual practice. It’s exactly what God did for us.

But I think there’s one more thing that we need to say about being present with pain. We have to take care of ourselves because to sit with someone else’s pain can be a heavy burden and if we don’t pay attention to ourselves, then we can harm ourselves and harm the one we are seeking to comfort. God has an unlimited capacity for compassion in the midst of suffering. But none of us are God. We all have a limited capacity as to what we can take upon selves. We all can get compassion fatigue and when we do so, not only are we in a bad place, but we cease being helpful to those who are in pain. Sometimes, when that happens, we end up making the pain about us – in front of the person we should be comforting.

A few years back, Susan Silk and Barry Goldman – a psychiatrist and a mediator wrote an article in the LA times about how to not say the wrong thing to someone in pain. In their article they had an illustration using concentric circles with a dot in the middle of the innermost circle. The person most affected by the pain or grief is the dot in the middle. The circle nearest the dot are the person’s immediate family. The next circle is extended family or close friends. The next circle may be neighbors or church members. Another circle may be work colleagues. And so on and so forth. The idea is that to balance caring for the person most affected by pain and caring for ourselves, we unload our pain with someone in a circle outside ours and not with someone in a circle inside ours. So if you are the dot in the middle, unload on anybody. If you are a family member of the person most affected, don’t put your grief and pain on them, but find somebody to talk to about your pain – it is real too. It can be a friend or a spouse, a pastor or a therapist. But please know that when you are being present for other in their pain, it is not selfish for you to pay attention to your own pain, to the toll it is taking on you. Take care of yourself because only in practicing self-care, are we able to truly be present to others in their pain.

You see, the spirituality of presence means being aware of those who are most hurt and their pain, but it is also about being aware of our own pain that we take upon through our relationship with the one in the center and finding appropriate and healing ways of expressing our pain too. And ultimately, the spirituality of presence is about recognizing that God is here in good times and in bad, that God is both working for our healing and God is suffering alongside us at the same time.

Friends, the spirituality of presence does not make pain go away, but it does ensure that none of us ever suffer alone. And for that, I am deeply grateful. Amen.