

Reconnecting the Grace-full Body: On Not Being Fine But Being Okay

Job 2:11-13; John 13:34-35

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A church family struggles to find affordable childcare for their three young children, so some of the older parents in the congregation jump in to help. An elderly man can no longer drive but needs to go to physical therapy multiple times per week, so a few church folks take turns driving him there. A dying woman in the congregation is cared for by one of our Stephen Ministers, and her family is so grateful that they thank the Stephen Minister in her obituary. A church member cares for her parents for years, and it is her church friends who help her care for herself. Another loses his job, and the congregation rallies around him to care for him and his family.

All of these are true examples of the love I have seen people in this congregation offer to each other in the years I have been here. And there are so many more! I have witnessed our congregation care for each other through house fires, parents' deaths, children's illnesses, financial crises, job loss, a global pandemic, depression, broken relationships, cancer. The list goes on and on as we, God's faithful people, do our best to be the hands and feet and heart of Christ to one another.

We are nearing the end of our sermon series on how we, all of us together, are the body of Christ and different ways we can grow and learn and serve together in our church. Today, we are going to focus on congregational care and some of the ministries we have for taking care of each other.

Before we get to specifics, though, let's take a little time to look at a couple of scriptural examples. The first comes from the book of Job, one of the deepest explorations of human suffering in the Bible. In the opening chapter, Job is described as an honest man of absolute integrity. He reveres God and avoids evil and is blessed with good health, ten children, thousands of animals, and many servants.

After we are introduced to Job, the scene changes. Suddenly, we are in the heavenly conference room eavesdropping on a conversation between God and the Satan, or Satan, a name which translates to the Adversary. The Adversary claims that if Job loses his children and possessions, he will blame God and no longer be so faithful. So, they put Job to the test. The Adversary kills all of his animals, servants, and children. Still, Job remains faithful. God and the Adversary meet again and agree that now Job will lose his good health. Soon, his body is covered in itchy, oozing sores. His wife tells him to curse God and die. Yet, still, Job stays faithful.

At this point, Job's friends hear about his suffering. They go to him to console and comfort him. They don't try to fix it for him. In fact, they don't actually do anything. Rather, they sit with him in silence for seven days, just being present to him in his pain. So often, that is what we have to offer when someone is suffering. Simply sitting with them, offering a hug or just our loving presence.

But then, the three friends try to understand why these things have happened to Job, and they decide he must have done something to anger God. All of this is his punishment. In modern society, we call this blaming the victim, and it is problematic first because Job has done nothing wrong, and secondly, because it assumes God rewards us when we are good and punishes us when we are bad. This idea of retributive justice does not align with a God of love and resurrection.

Now, let's fast forward a long way through the Bible, into the New Testament. In Jesus, God came to live among humanity to reveal God's self to us. To give us a glimpse into who God is, what God values, and how we might live in alignment with God's kin-dom values.

On the eve of his death, Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment. Before this night, Jesus said that the greatest commandments were to love God with all your heart, soul, and might and your neighbor as yourself. Now, at the Last Supper, Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

This is the foundation for how we care for each other. We love as Jesus loves. So, how does Jesus love? First of all, with acceptance. Jesus loves his disciples, but he also loves the tax collectors and the prostitutes and the lepers. He loves and welcomes all. His acceptance is one expression of a greater truth - that he loves with grace. How many times do the disciples do or say stupid things? They are blind to who he is, they compete for his favor, they doubt him and themselves. Yet, he always loves them, and he always forgives them. There is no moral judgment in his love. He also loves sacrificially, showing us what love looks like when we give up something of ourselves or our lives for the greater good. Finally, he loves eternally. He doesn't give up on the disciples or walk away. He stays with them despite their mistakes and their blindness and their sometimes childlike behavior. Likewise, he doesn't give up or walk away from us. Nor should we give up or walk away from each other.

So, there is strong scriptural support for congregations caring for their members. Not just support - it's actually a commandment. So, how does that happen in practical terms?

Of course, it starts with each of us as individuals as God's Spirit prompts us to respond in the face of another's pain or need. Are we willing to sit and listen, to just be present, to consider what we might have to offer in support of someone else or the church itself? On the flip side, are we willing to be vulnerable with each other and ask for help when we need it?

One vehicle the church offers that creates space for us to share our challenges and offer support is small groups. When John Wesley created the structure for the Methodist movement, he built it primarily on small groups. Everyone was expected to be in one. He had three different types of groups - societies, classes, and bands. Societies were focused on educating folks in the tenets of Methodism. Classes were small groups focused on support and accountability as the members worked at living Christ-like lives. They began each meeting with the question, "How goes it with your soul?" Finally, bands were designed for deeper soul-searching as people worked on improving their behavior, attitudes, emotions, and assumptions.

Here at FUMC we don't have quite such a structured approach to small groups. However, we do start new groups periodically, sometimes around a specific book study or common interest,

sometimes simply to bring people together for mutual support. These are organized by our Adult Faith Formation Director, Wendy Everett. I know of one group here that has been together at least 35 years -since their children were in diapers. Now, those children are adults having children of their own. These folks have traveled through divorces, deaths, births, child-rearing, graduations, weddings, and any number of life challenges together.

Other ways you might get involved in congregational care fall under the direction of Amy Kennedy. Amy is our Minister of Congregational Care and has primary responsibility for how we care for people in crisis, those in the hospital, shut-ins, and people who are grieving, among others. When someone is in need of specifically pastoral care, Amy lets me and Jenaba know so we can follow up. Amy's background is as a hospice nurse, and she has a deep faith that she has fostered over many years. In fact, Amy recently completed training as a Spiritual Director and offers spiritual direction to those who are interested.

Amy works with several important teams here at church including our visitation team. These are congregation members who regularly visit individuals, usually shut-ins, whom they call their JOY friends. They carry the love and care of our church out to those who can't be here with us. Often, relationships between visitors and their JOY friends last for years and become quite meaningful. Recently, one member of the visitation team painted a picture of her JOY friend's cat for her. Another walks or jogs alongside her JOY friend in his wheelchair along the Border to Border trail.

Another example of how we care for each other is our Stephen Ministry program. Stephen Ministers go through extensive training in how to listen to and support individuals who face challenging circumstances. They don't try to fix the problem. They are there to listen. In our church, we have had Stephen Ministers care for someone who received a life-changing diagnosis, several people who lost a loved one, and a parent struggling with their child's behavior challenges, among others.

We also have our access team. Mary McClusky leads this group which focuses on educating ourselves to be more aware of and compassionate to those who have hidden and obvious disabilities. In addition, Amy recruits Access Helpers, congregation members who show up 20 minutes early before the service and watch for those who need help with opening a door, understanding parking, or finding the sanctuary.

There are many other ways we care for each other, as well, including our prayer ministry and the lovely ministry of our United Women of Faith who provide receptions after memorial services.

At a time when we see so much hurt and upheaval around us, Jesus calls us to be the presence and love of God to each other. In one-to-one relationships, small groups, or structured programs within the church, we express our love, like Job's three friends, by being present, offering what we have, and helping as we can. At FUMC, we are committed to loving each other as Jesus loves us.

May it be so. Amen.