

# **“Christ Caring for People Through People”**

## **2 Corinthians 1:3-5**

This past March 12, we commissioned 7 new Stephen Ministers. Our Stephen Ministers are a conduit through whom Christ cares for people. We may or may not have a Stephens Ministry class this fall. Either way, this is my annual recruitment sermon for new ministers and affirmation sermon for all of you, whether you're a Stephen Minister or not, who open yourselves up to Christ caring for someone through you.

Psalm 23:4 . . . <sup>4</sup>Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.

No passage of scripture has been used more often to comfort hurting people than Psalm 23. What comfort do the suffering find here? What comfort did I find here when laying in a hospital bed during most of the summer of 2020? The incomparable presence of God.

In search of good pastureland, shepherds and sheep often encountered danger because of the rugged landscape, the constant threat of attack by wild animals, or the ruthlessness of bandits and robbers.

As the shepherd and the sheep together entered the valley of the shadow of death, the shepherd carried a rod and staff to protect the sheep and himself from harm.

Just as the shepherd is with his sheep, God is with his people. His presence comforts. It means that wherever we are, in whatever situation, we are not alone.

Not alone! What is more discouraging and disorienting than feeling utterly alone? Jesus knew something about loneliness. The Trinity – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has been described as an ongoing and eternal conversation of love, a “witness” for which human companionship has no

parallel. On the cross Jesus suddenly experienced abandonment – the total disruption of this unique relationship. Those who suffer aloneness experience depths of despair expressed in Jesus’ heart-breaking cry on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Aloneness is never so sharp as when someone is suffering. Suffering people may have a difficult time believing God is with them.

One gift you can offer them is to be present in their pain. The physical presence of another human being can bring comfort to those who are suffering.

Even terrible pain and suffering can become bearable when people know someone is truly and fully with them – understanding and empathizing with them in their pain. As caring Christians, we follow the Good Shepherd’s example when we walk them in their dark valleys.

St. Paul writes in II Corinthians 1:3-5 . . . <sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, <sup>4</sup>who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. <sup>5</sup>For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ.

The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy loved the workers on his family’s estate, so for a while he worked with them and shared their food and slept in their primitive cottages. I kind of did the same thing during our trips to the Tex-Mex border when we stayed in family’s corrugated steel homes and helped them start a church.

Tolstoy was shocked when the workers told him and we could be told the same thing, “we’re not really impressed by your coming to live like us. You’ve got your rich father to fall back

on. You can stop living in poverty anytime you choose. But this is just what we cannot do. You just act as if you were one of us.

As Christians, when we meet Jesus, we meet God in the flesh. Jesus did not merely act as if he were like us. He suffered like us and for us. He even experienced the sense of being godforsaken that we may feel when we suffer.

We are never alone in suffering because God suffers with us. Because God is a suffering God, he is uniquely qualified to be the “Father of compassion and the God of all comfort”. God is with us as one who understands pain and suffering from personal experience.

St. Paul’s firm belief that God comforts his people in troubled times was truly revolutionary. In Paul’s world, people believed that the gods didn’t care at all about humans or their comfort. But Paul says we don’t have to suffer alone because God is the source of all comfort.

The Greek word translated comfort has the basic meaning “to call alongside”. When Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit in John 14:26, he referred to the Spirit by the name “Comforter” – the one called to your side.

When Paul talks about the comfort of God, he speaks from experience, from a life full of troubles, afflictions and pressure. Paul has earned the right to speak in this flurry of chaos called life.

Christians by definition are people who receive the comfort of God and who are empowered to embody God’s comfort in our relationships with others. Stephen Ministers receive training to embody God’s comfort in their relationships with their care receivers. All of us are called to be a community of comforters, Divinity Lutheran Church, at the head of which stands the suffering God, the source of all comfort.

1 John 4:12 . . . <sup>2</sup>No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

When God chose to reveal himself to humanity, he did so in a way that we human beings are most capable of understanding. He knew that we could experience his presence most powerfully, not through glimpses of heaven or mystical visions, but in human form – in Jesus.

Throughout his life, Jesus exemplified care and compassion for those who were hurting. Christians are called to be Christ to the world by incarnating his love wherever there is pain and suffering. When Christians love and care for those who are hurting, God’s character shines forth. No one has ever seen God, but they see God’s love through caring and compassionate Christians. Just as we can see God by what Jesus did, so those who are suffering can see God by what we do.

Suffering, especially, if it’s prolonged or severe, can cause people to question God’s presence and care. But if they can feel his love, a love made incarnate, full and complete, in the caring people they see, touch, and hear, then they are assured of God’s presence. They can know that he hasn’t abandoned them. In you they see God.

Romans 12:5 . . . <sup>5</sup>so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

In Romans, Paul addresses a band of believers living in the heart of a thriving empire. This urban church was certainly full of people with different backgrounds, experiences, gifts, abilities, and perspective – not unlike Divinity.

Paul teaches that the church is as diverse as the human body, with each member offering a unique giftedness, performing a different role or function. But just like the human body, the body of Christ – the church – Divinity is unified in purpose. We are always a part of something much larger

than ourselves. The idea of a lone or maverick Christian is not found in New Testament. Instead, each Christian is united with all other Christians to form one body.

St. Paul makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 12:26 . . . <sup>26</sup>If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

We, as followers of Christ are beloved members of God's family – sons and daughters, brothers and sisters. Whatever joy or sorrow touches on family members affects all family members. If a son becomes an Eagle Scout, the whole family is energized by his accomplishment. If a sister loses her husband, all family members are touched by her sadness and sense of loss. As members of God's family, we are called to bear what the family bears, no less. That's how Paul describes the church as God intends it to be.

In a congregation the size of Divinity, we need many people doing the ministry of caregiving. We participate in Christ's suffering when we come along side the hurting and offer them the blessing of our presence. We participate in Christ's sufferings when we weep with those who weep. We participate in Christ's suffering when we die to ourselves so we can fully enter into the pain and suffering of another person.

Jesus says that when we provide care in his name to the least of his brothers or sisters, we are having compassion on him. So, when we care for those in need, we are offering a powerful witness to the presence of Christ in the world – Christ alive in you and in the one to whom you are offering care.

Then we experience the peace of God . . .

#720 – We Are Called