

The Practice of Visiting the Sick & The Lonely

Based on Matthew 25:31-40, I Corinthians 12:24b-27, & James 1:27

A Message Offered by Toby Jones to the People of ChxUCC on October 8, 2023

We come this morning to the 6th spiritual practice in our exploration of the practices of Jesus, the regular exercises that he wanted his followers to do in our lives as a reflection of him and his teaching. You'll recall that Jesus's brother James instructed that we were not to be mere hearers of Jesus's word but that we should be *doers* of the word. It is that is in that spirit – the spirit of DOING what Jesus did – that has fueled this entire sermon series on spiritual practices.

Today's practice is near and dear to my heart, for it is this practice – visiting the sick and the lonely – that led me to pursue full-time ministry in the first place. I was in the college at the time, when, through a series of rather fluky and unexpected circumstances, I found myself serving as the student associate pastor at Gobin Memorial United Methodist Church on the campus of DePauw University. I hadn't even attended that church while I was in college, when an application to be their student associate pastor mysteriously turned up in my mailbox at the fraternity house. I filled it out somewhat reluctantly, turned it in, and was hired at the start of my senior year.

My senior pastor and supervisor was a kind, soft-spoken man by the name of Summer Walters, and on my first day, he suggested that I visit some of the elderly, homebound members of this church. I was not too excited about this assignment. I was a 20-year-old, senior in college. I knew nothing about old people or what one said to them when visiting as a pastor. But I came to discover quite quickly that the power and importance of these visits had nothing to do with what I said. These homebound folks were thrilled to have someone show an interest in them. Simply to take the time to come over, to sit and listen to them was transformational for these folks. I began to develop a list of questions I would ask these folks, just to learn about them and hear about their lives. "Where did you grow up? What were your favorite things to do? Tell me about your late husband or wife? Can I see some pictures of your children and grandchildren? What do you like and appreciate the most about your church family?"

I came to really love and look forward to these conversations. More importantly, I came to love the people with whom I was having these conversations. But probably the biggest and most surprising thing I learned from these home visits was just how rarely these people were visited. My visits brought them to life *not* because of me or anything I said, but because of how much they

craved human contact and interaction. They loved sitting with someone, having their hand held, being asked questions, and listened to. Initially, when Pastor Walters sent me out on these visits, I had been so worried about my lack of training and knowledge of pastoral care. But those worries quickly dissipated as I came to see that it was my presence and ability to listen that mattered most. Much to my own surprise, I really came to love these home, hospital, and care facility visits. In fact, it was *this* spiritual practice and work of ministry that solidified my decision to go to seminary and seek ordination.

If you were listening to the three passages for the morning, you probably came away with a strong sense of just how much Jesus emphasized this practice. In that pivotal sheep and goats' parable, when he is listing the practices that most distinguish his followers from the disciples of other rabbis, Jesus said, "I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison, and you visited me..." I have been visiting the sick, the lonely, the suffering, and those in some sort of prison for 42 years now and have come to understand that with my mere attentive presence in such a visit, I am, in a sense, doing all of the things on Jesus's Matthew 25 list. When we visit a lonely or suffering person, we ARE feeding the hungry, giving drink to the parched, inviting a stranger in, clothing them, and, in some ways, freeing them from a kind of prison they are in.

So, in what sense is visiting those who are sick and lonely a spiritual practice? Well, earlier in this series, I defined a spiritual practice as something that a) deepens our intimacy with God and, at the same time b) helps God's kingdom come and God's will be done ON EARTH – making the world a better place. Visiting those who are sick, alone, or suffering does both of these things in spades. First, on the intimacy-with-God front, from the very first visit I did in 1982, I prayed like crazy! I talked to God when I was driving to the person's home or care facility. I talked to God on my way up the front steps. I prayed for wisdom and direction as I got to the person's door. And then, I felt God's presence with both of us throughout the visit. This is still the case today. God is in the room with us when we do something so simple, so loving, and so Christ-like.

True confessions time...there are times, even here as I serve as your pastor, when I get overly wrapped up in bible study preparation, sermon preparation, committee work, etc. And the result of all that is that I start to feel a little cut off from God, dislodged, out of rhythm, and out of sorts. Care to guess what gets me back on track – back into a strong sense of God's presence and feeling more in

sync with the divine...? Going to visit someone who is lonely or hurting. Such a visit pulls me out of myself. It gets me out of my own head, my own stresses, my own funk. And such a visit builds connection in the world. It sows seeds of goodness, compassion, and empathy. Paul was absolutely right in I Corinthians 12:26 when he wrote, "God has put the body of Christ together in such a way that...when one part suffers, every part suffers with it; and if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it." I experience that truth in the spiritual practice of visiting people. I experienced that truth 42 years ago, and I still experience it today. I'm talking about it here this morning because I want *you* to experience it to.

We are a small church, and do you know what the vast majority of small churches spend their energy doing...? They wish that they were big churches. They lament what they don't have, and they envy the bigger churches with more resources. Newsflash! That kind of attitude does NObody any good, and it certainly doesn't do the world any good. Small congregations like us are incredibly well positioned to be amazing at visiting and taking care of each another. We live pretty close together; we know each other by name and face, for the most part; we have a prayer list and a simple, accessible data base; we have a Reaching In team who keeps track of who is in any kind of need; and I can tell you from experience that the people in our church family who are homebound or in care facilities are fun and interesting to talk to. And, of course, this spiritual practice need not be restricted to people in our church family. Anybody you know who is alone, hurting, or sick is someone you can and should visit.

I read a recent NY Times article about a relatively new movement in Medical schools known as narrative medicine. Forward thinking medical schools and physicians are realizing that when they visit with a patient – whether it is a telehealth visit or an in-person one – if all they ask about are the person's symptoms, they are likely to miss the underlying problems and the crux of the issue. Narrative medicine encourages doctors to ask patients about their lives, to listen to their stories and get a feel for the person as a person and not just as a patient. One medical student, Fletcher Bell, put it this way. "Simply listening to people's stories can be therapeutic," Mr. Bell observed. "If there is fluid in the lungs, you drain it. If there is a story in the heart, it's important to get that out too. That also is a medical intervention, just not one that can be easily quantified." One nurse manager added, "Unless they have access to the patient's story, health care providers don't understand that this is a mother who is taking care of six children, or who doesn't have the resources to pay for medication, or

that this is a veteran who has severe trauma that needs to be addressed before even talking about how to manage the pain.” One med school professor involved in teaching Narrative Medicine calls this approach “radical listening.” I like that. (“Learning to Listen to Patients’ Stories” – NY Times, Feb 25, 2021)

Let me tell you again that the practice of visiting the sick and the lonely is not about knowing what to say. I had no idea what to say as a 20-year-old when Summer Walters sent me on my first visit as a student assistant pastor, and sometimes I still have no idea what I’m going to say 42 years later. What I realize now is that what I’m going to say isn’t the most important thing. My compassionate presence and my radical listening are. The effort I’m taking in simply showing up is. I can give you a list of questions to get the conversation going if you’d like. But there’s a reason God gave us two ears and only one mouth. And that same brilliant, creative God who gave us those two ears gave us no capacity for closing them. Have you ever thought about that? We can close our eyes with our eyelids; we can close our mouth with our lips; but we have no built in mechanism for closing our ears. Hmmm? I wonder why? Our ears are the number one tool we need when visiting someone, followed closely by this... our hearts...And I KNOW you’ve *all* got those...darned good ones!

When Jesus’s brother James was writing his New Testament letter and tried to summarize his brother’s rabbinical teaching, he put it this way: “Religion that God accepts as pure and faultless is to look after widows and orphans in their distress...” Wow! That’s powerful! That’s what I’m talking about! The pure and faultless religion that our God wants from us boils down to the simple, beautiful, spiritual practice of visiting the sick and the lonely. Take your open ears with you. Take your open heart with you, and let God do the rest. The practice of visiting the sick and the lonely was one of Jesus’s highest priorities. He emphasized it with his followers again and again. We can do this no matter our age or the size of our congregation. Let’s do it! Amen.