

5. How to be a true friend

May 27, 2012

The 16th Century British poet John Donne's quote "No man is an island" is rather well known. Even the toughest guy in the world needs a friend or someone who cares about him when trials of life come down the pike.

If you've been in church for some time, you've heard the term "Job's comforters". It is a familiar phrase for describing people whose help only makes you feel worse. But these three friends of Job had some admirable qualities in spite of the way they came against Job after their silence for seven days and nights.

This morning I believe that the Lord wants us to learn how to be a true friend to those who experience difficulties during their time of loss, sufferings, and trials. Remember, being a FAT Christian? Faithful, Available, and Teachable.

A. THEY CAME

Job 2:11 Now when Job's three friends heard of all this adversity that had come upon him, each one came from his own place--Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. For they had made an appointment together to come and mourn with him, and to comfort him.

No doubt, the news of Job's loss and distress had spread through Facebook pages and Twitters in his community. When three of Job's friends heard of his predicament, they rushed to the scene.

I don't know what they did for a living, but they made themselves available to be with their friend Job. We have to give this to them. They came all the way.

When your loved one is going through a hard time, if it is all possible, be there. Your presence will make all the difference in the world.

Matthew 26:36-38 Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to the disciples, "Sit here while I go and pray over there." 37 And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. 38 Then He said to them, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me."

Think about it. Our Lord Jesus, Almighty God, wanted to have His friends near while He was agonizing in prayer at the Garden of Gethsemane.

He didn't ask for a sermon, He didn't want an explanation, and He wasn't looking for someone to step in and fix His situation. In His humanity and in His sorrow that night, Jesus just wanted a few friends around, that's all. Unfortunately, they couldn't keep their eyes open and slept right through His great anguish and struggle.

While my wife Karen was laboring with our daughter Michelle for 12 hours throughout the night in a hospital room, I was so sleepy and I was kept on falling asleep next to her bed. She got so mad at me that she picked up a bedpan and whacked me upside of my head. No, she didn't. She was too nice to do that. She should have.

When someone is hurting, you just need to go to them. One of the best things you can say is, "I don't know what to say." Then take your own advice and don't say anything! If you do say something, keep it simple.

For example, let them know by saying “I love you,” “I’m here for you,” “I’m praying for you.”

As a pastor and a Sheriff’s Department chaplain, I frequently have to walk right into the middle of human suffering. And when I get that call that someone’s child or spouse has died, or someone has found out they have cancer, it’s very hard to deal with many times. Even pastors don’t know what to say at times.

But most of the time, my words aren’t all that important anyway. I have found that by simply showing up – showing love, and a readiness to listen – I’ve been able to bring comfort to these grieving ones.

B. THEY WEPT AND SAID NOTHING

Job 2:12-13 And when they raised their eyes from afar, and did not recognize him, they lifted their voices and wept; and each one tore his robe and sprinkled dust on his head toward heaven. 13 So they sat down with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his grief was very great.

Job’s three friends cried. Some people might say, “That is not good. Someone has to be strong. If I cry, it will make the matter worse.” No, it wouldn’t. The person who is going through difficulty will be comforted by your cry because he or she knows that you are hurting for them as well. God says it’s OK.

Romans 12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

When we’re suffering, we don’t need blame, shame, lame answers, or even false labels. Instead, we need true friends. We seek out listening ears and open hearts. We desire comfort and companionship. In order to mend, our hurting spirits need a healing dose of compassion and encouragement.

Most of us aren’t hard of hearing; we’re hard of listening. Let me say that again. Most of us aren’t hard of hearing; we’re hard of listening. Are you listening to me? We tend to forget that God had a reason for giving each of us two ears and only one mouth! Often, listening is the best gift you can offer a struggling loved one. Focus on understanding his or her situation and empathizing with his or her pain before you attempt to say anything. If you do feel led to speak, offer a word of comfort and share the truth in love.

When you speak to the ones who are hurting, talk quietly. A quiet gentle voice is very soothing to troubled hearts.

Several years ago, I was visiting a long time friend at Tucson Medical Center. We’ve served the Lord together in many occasions. He was a man of few words and had a gentle loving spirit. He had a cancer and went into remission for a while, but it came back with vengeance. That was the reason he ended up in TMC again. The diagnosis didn’t look good.

As I was talking with him in his hospital room, one of his neighbors who happened to be a pastor of one of the charismatic denominations walked in. From the moment he walked in, he was loud and boisterous. Now two was company, three was a crowd.

Before I left my friend, I asked him if he'd like me to pray for him, and he quietly answered, "Yes, please." So, as I started to pray, that pastor was hollering, "Hallelujah!" and started to speak in tongues loudly. I knew that it was his style, but I didn't think that my friend was appreciating it. After the prayer, I left his room.

Later, my wife Karen told me that my friend told his wife that he didn't want me to leave, but he wanted the other guy gone.

C. DON'T

Since we are in the topic of listening more than speaking, there are a few things that we should not do when we comfort those who are in distress. Here are a couple of tips:

1) Don't try to explain everything; explanations never heal a broken heart. Besides, we really don't have the foggiest idea how the things work behind the scene, especially in the spiritual world.

2) Don't use cliches. It only deepens the sorrowing person's pain.

- "I know how you feel." – No, you don't! So why say it?
 - "There's a reason for everything." – That may be true, but neither of you have any idea what that might be.
 - "Well, no one ever said life was fair." – What a rotten thing to say to someone in crisis!
 - "What doesn't kill us makes us stronger." – What idiot came up with that little gem?
 - "Well, cheer up. There's always someone worse off." – Believe it or not, I've heard that one too many times. It has zero – no, negative comfort value, and sounds about as callous as you can get.
 - "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade." – Say that and your friend will be seriously thinking about making you a lemon.
 - "Don't worry. Be happy." – Are you serious? Now, they are thinking of killing you.
 - "Don't cry" – Now, they will kill you for sure. What do you mean, "Don't cry"?
- That's holding people to a higher standard than even the Lord Jesus does! The Bible says there is a time to laugh and a time to weep. Even Jesus wept at the tomb of His dear friend, Lazarus.

D. FIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF A TRUE FRIEND WE CAN HAVE

1) A true friend cares enough to respond without being invited to respond. No one sent a message to Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, saying, "Please come and give a little sympathy and comfort to Job. He's dying in his anguish." instead, Job's friends just came.

I am not saying that you should be a busybody. When your friends or family members go through a traumatic time, make an effort to call, stop by, send a card or letter, or somehow connect with them. Don't wait for an invitation to show that you care because a deeply hurting person will rarely offer one. Please don't think that you are bothering them. They will never think that.

2) A true friend responds with sympathy and comfort.

Friends identify with those who suffer. They comfort others by helping to make their sorrow lighter in practical way. They do what needs to be done: taking a loved one out to dinner, running errands, taking care of the kids, cooking a meal.

Why do we do this? Because true friends have a covenant-type relationship that cannot be easily broken. And part of the covenant is the commitment to be there, no

matter what. Your presence during the fun times will be remembered, but your presence during a crisis will be cherished even more.

3) A true friend openly expresses the depth of his or her feelings.

When a true friend perceives a loved one's suffering, it's not uncommon to see him or her fighting back tears. Acquaintances don't do that, but friends do. They empathize with others' pain. When their loved ones suffer, they suffer. And when their loved ones celebrate, they celebrate.

4) A true friend isn't turned off by distasteful sights.

Can you imagine how Job's friends must have felt when they saw Job for the first time after his disaster? He sat on a heap of ashes with his head shaven and his robe torn, his skin blackened and covered with hideous boils. A stinging cloud of smoke rose from the burning piles of human and animal dung that surrounded him. Ravenous dogs roamed through the rubbish, searching for scraps of food. Some of the dogs even stopped to lick Job's sores. Unthinkable!

No doubt, Job's friends were stunned beyond belief at this sight. Yet they stuck by him. They expressed their grief outwardly and then sat down to mourn with their friend for seven days and seven nights. They exposed themselves to the ashes, dogs, waste, and outcasts in order to show Job that they cared. Now, that's commitment!

Acquaintances walk away from distasteful sights of sufferers, but a true friend sticks by. Someone who is wise said this: "Many people will walk in and out of your life, but only true friends will leave footprints in your heart." That's good, huh?

5) A true friend understands and has to say very little.

Compassion, not judgment, heals hearts. We offer more comfort to hurting souls when we listen than when we try to explain everything. A caring hug, a warm squeeze of the hand, a visit to a hospital room, a heartfelt prayer... these are what friends offer in tough times. Remember, a true friend is someone who comes to you when the whole world has gone out.