

How to Be There for Others ***Jeff Jones***

Today we continue our series, *The Secret Sauce*, focusing on some of the components that make up the kind of life-giving relationships God created us to build. Last week I mentioned that this week would be on hard conversations, but I was wrong. That's next week. You can learn how to confront me about my mistake then. This week we are talking about consistency, being there for people when being there is hard.

When you first hear that phrase, "being there," it may sound pretty lame—being there. It's like when I played baseball, just one season, and I wasn't very good at it, so when I was up at bat rarely did people in the stands who wanted to be encouraging have anything to say. I struck out a lot. The best I got was when I just stood there as a pitch went by the plate. If it was a ball, people would say, "Good eye! Good eye!" That's the best it got, and a few pitches later after I struck out, people might say, "That's okay! You'll get 'em next time." There was something so defeating hearing "Good eye" as my biggest contribution to the game.

Just being there feels the same to me, like the crowd shouting, "Good eye!" or "Way to be there!" "Way to show up!" I want to do more than to just show up, but what we are going to see today is that showing up is way more powerful than we think. All of us need people in our lives who show up, who are there for us when being there is hard—not necessarily to solve anything or make it all better...but to strengthen us in the way that only the right person showing up can.

It's of course easier not to show up, and when we show up not knowing how can help or what we can say, it can be so awkward. But today I want to motivate you and me to push through that awkwardness and be people who show up in the lives of people around us. Today we are talking about how to be there when being there is hard. We all need that, and we all have the opportunity to do that.

We are going to see this today in a very personal and vulnerable passage in the Bible where Paul is basically begging a trusted friend to show up, when doing so would have been really difficult to do. It's in the book of 2 Timothy, which was Paul's last letter. He was in a dungeon in Rome imprisoned by Nero and shortly

after writing this letter he would be beheaded. So, 2 Timothy was written at a very difficult time for Paul. Paul is writing to Timothy, and he says,

The Lord was with him, but at his biggest time of need, “no one came to my support” and “everyone deserted me.” Picture a kid playing in a big game scanning the crowd for her parents, and nobody is there. This was may more dramatic than that. To understand it, we need to know the backstory. It was a really bad time to be a Christian in Rome, because Nero the Emperor had initiated a terrible time of persecution against Christians that was very violent and very real. Nero was a nut case, and he hated Christians. A few years earlier, he had burned much of Rome for selfish reasons and when people were upset he blamed it on the Christians and started an incredible period of persecution against the church. He started one of the multiple rounds in the Roman empire where Christians were killed in the Coliseum for sport. The ancient Roman historian Tacitus wrote at the time:

SLIDE _____) (Put on one slide)

“Ergo abolendo rumori Nero subdidit reos. et quaesitissimis poenis adfecit quos per flagitia invisos vulgus christianos appellabat. Auctor nominis eius christus. Tyberio imperitante per procuratorem pontium pilatum supplicio adfectus erat. repressaque in praesens exitiabilis superstitio rursum erumpebat.”

-Tacitus

Or, in English:

SLIDE _____)

"Therefore, to put an end to the rumor Nero created a diversion and subjected to the most extra-ordinary tortures those hated for their abominations by the common people called Christians...Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames. These served to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open the gardens for the spectacle... Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to satisfy one man's cruelty, that they were being punished.”

-Tacitus

They would sew Christians alive into the carcasses of recently killed animals and place them in the arena with starved wild dogs. He also had the habit of covering live Christians with pitch and lighting them on fire to serve as outdoor lighting for

evening parties in his gardens. That's what it meant to be a Christian in Rome around the time Paul was there, so most Christians had fled the city and it certainly was not safe to be identified as a Christian.

So, in the middle of this, Paul is arrested and brought to Rome. As a Roman citizen, he has the right to a trial, and as with us there were two steps. A first trial, like our grand jury trial, and then the actual trial. Paul is talking about that first trial, and the way the grand jury trial worked is that people would come and argue on your behalf, stand with you in court, to see if the case would be dismissed or move forward to the next trial. In Paul's case, nobody stood with Paul. Nobody showed up to speak in his defense.

Now that would have been incredibly painful and disappointing to Paul. There were Christians in Rome who could have stood by him, and it is mysterious where Luke was. We don't know, maybe out of town or not there yet. But nobody came, nobody stood with him, nobody spoke for him. You can see why though because if people did come they would be identifying themselves as Christians and could also be arrested and killed. We are talking about being there when being there is hard, and it's pretty hard to be there when Nero might take you, cover you with tar, and light you on fire to light his dinner party that night. You can tell though that Paul would have shown up for these other people, but these other people did not do that for him.

SLIDE _____) 2 Timothy 4:9-11

“Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Only Luke is with me.”

Paul always traveled with a team, and his team was no longer there. We don't know exactly happened with Demas, except that he “deserted” Paul. The Greek word translated “deserted” means left in a bad situation. When Paul needed Demas most, Demas split because he loved this present world, more than the one to come. He had sent other team members on other assignments, so now “only” Luke was with him. That makes it sound like Luke was kind of a dud, but I don't think that's what he meant. Paul's circumstances in Rome were horrific. He was in a dungeon, dark and damp and cold...rat infested, little food. He wasn't vacationing in Italy. He was in a horrible situation, and those that had been with him split in his greatest hour of need. He needed other people around him, not just Luke. He felt alone.

Have you ever felt that way—alone when you needed people more than ever? When things are going well, we can do okay living a fairly isolated life. But when circumstances turn south, we realize our need for people. If we are alone, we really feel alone.

So far this is a sad story, but it only gets more sad in verse 16, where we read:

SLIDE _____) 2 Timothy 4:16

“At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them.”

SLIDE _____) 2 Timothy 4:17-18

“But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen”

And yes, Jesus was with him and strengthened him, but that didn't change his need for people to be with him. That's why just below our passage, Paul repeats his request:

SLIDE _____) 2 Timothy 4:21

“Do your best to come before winter.”

Paul had started the letter saying,

SLIDE _____) 2 Timothy 1:4

“Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy.”

They were close friends, so much so that the last thing he remembers when they split company was Timothy's tears. Now, he needs his friend more than ever. So, he says,

SLIDE _____) 2 Timothy 4:9
“Do your best to come to me quickly”

and

SLIDE _____) 2 Timothy 4:21
“Do your best to come before winter.”

Timothy was at the time in Ephesus, about 1000 miles away from Rome, and long journeys back then took a while. But Paul knew that Timothy would do whatever it took to make it happen. As he says,

SLIDE _____) 2 Timothy 4:13
“When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.”

Timothy was a “when you come” kind of friend, not an “if you come” kind of friend. Do you have friends like that? People who will drop everything to show up, no matter how hard it is to show up? My brother is very sick and right now unresponsive, and my sister in law, Becky is caring for him constantly. She is so focused on him that she hasn’t been communicating with her friends who want to be there for her, so one of them drove from San Antonio to Birmingham, without letting Becky know, and just showed up at her door—basically saying, “I’m here, and feel free to ignore me if you need to stay focused. But I’m here as long as you need me to be here.” That’s a friend.

We all know how easy it is for friends to show up when times are good, but a true friend is there when times are not good and being there is not easy.

Proverbs 17:17 says,

SLIDE _____) Proverbs 17:17
"A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity."

A genuine friend is in your corner when you're cornered. A real friend walks in when everybody else walks out. A brother is born for adversity. Like one person said, real friends are like toothpaste -- they come through in a tight squeeze, when the pressure's on. How do you find that kind of friend? You don't find them you build them over time. That's one of the main reasons getting in a small group is so important. The first question I ask when I hear that a Chase Oaker is going through some kind of tragic circumstance is, "Are they in a group?" I know if they are in a group at Chase Oaks, that group is going to be there for that person. But when I hear back, "No, they aren't," something inside me just sinks. We will do what we can to be there, but it's not the same as trusted friends. You need to take that step to cultivate those kinds of friends.

But the best way to find that kind of a friend is to be that kind of a friend. That's what we are called to do, to be there for people when being there is hard. Paul does share earlier in 2 Timothy about one more friend who showed up, after the grand jury trial, but he showed up as soon as he could:

What did Onesiphorus do that meant so much to Paul? He showed up. It's not like Onesiphorus came and broke Paul out of prison and took him on a golf trip to Pebble Beach. There is nothing Onesiphorus, or Timothy, or anyone else could do to change Paul's circumstances. Paul was in a Roman dungeon awaiting a trial that would end up with him being executed. Paul wasn't asking Timothy to solve anything. He was asking him to show up.

It's similar to another time in Paul's life he talks about in 2 Corinthians:

SLIDE _____) 2 Corinthians 7:5-6

"For when we came into Macedonia, we had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus."

How did God strengthen Paul so much? He didn't change his circumstances. He did however send Titus. And what did Titus do? He didn't solve the problem, because he couldn't. But he did what he could do. He showed up. And that showing up gave Paul the strength he needed to get through the circumstance.

As I think back in life, I am so thankful for people who showed up like that. Years ago, when Collin was in 3rd grade I think, he was at a church camp and got seriously injured. He and his buddies had a bright idea to drag a picnic table underneath a basketball hoop so that they could jump on the chair, then the table, and do a slam dunk. Collin was the first to go, and it was great on the way up, but he didn't think too much about the way down. He landed on his head on the concrete slab underneath the rim. So, I get a call from a hospital in remote East Texas that said, "We are careflighting your son to Children's Hospital in Dallas, because we don't have what we need to care for him here. All I can tell you right now is that he fractured his skull, has a brain bleed, and swelling in the brain." I had a lot more questions, but they had no answers. Christy was teaching swim lessons, and I got here out of the pool, and we rushed down to Children's. That wait for the care flight was so scary long. But I'll never forget two people walking in the waiting room and what that meant to us. Mike and Sharon Cornwall, who were elders at the time and are still Chase Oakers, came and sat with us and prayed with us. Did they fix anything? Of course not. They couldn't do that. But they could be there, and they chose to drop everything and do so. I can't tell you how strengthening that was. When Collin did arrive, all strapped on the immobilizer, you know what his first words to me were? "Dad, I made the basket!" I was like, "Oh, totally worth it then." Gotta love that, and he did recover in time. But the Cornwalls showed to us the power of just showing up.

As a pastor I've been in lots of situations with families that are hard, and sometimes it is really awkward because I want to do more than just show up. It does feel a little like hearing the baseball crowd shout, "Good eye!" when I didn't swing at a ball. I want to do more than just show up. I want to fix it. I want to make it all better. I want to say the perfect thing that will take the sting away or the fear away. That's part of the awkwardness of showing up, right? You don't know what to do, you don't know what to say, you wonder if you are just going to be in the way. My experience has been that if you are a good friend and you wondering if you should show up, you probably should. And when you do, don't stress out too much about what to say or what to do. Nobody expects you to say the perfect thing or to solve and unsolvable problem. You show up, and do what you can. What can you do? How about these 3 P's: Presence, Prayer, Practical Help. You can't probably solve the problem, but you can be present. You can pray. And you can offer practical help. Paul asks Timothy to bring his winter cloak, this thick wool pancho kind of thing that people had for cold and wet weather, that Paul would need in a cold dungeon as winter was approaching. He asks for his books too, because he still had work to do. Don't underestimate the importance of practical help. Take care of the kids, bring meals, clean their house, do whatever you can do.

And if you go and things are crazy and you are in the way, that's okay. Slip out. You still showed up, and you did what you could.

SLIDE_____)

Presence

Prayer

Practical Help

The 3 P's: Presence, Prayer, Practical Help. I'm kind of proud that! But more important than coming up with the 3 p's for a sermon is to go do them for a friend who is in hard circumstances. The choice to be there when being there is hard is not easy, but a beautiful choice—the kind of choice a true friend makes.

Let me encourage you to be that kind of friend. Do you have someone in your life right now who is in a hard time, and you've been wondering what to do? Try the 3 P's. Show up. It's harder right now in a pandemic but get creative and figure it out.

Others of you might be in such a time, and you feel like Paul was feeling when he writes to Timothy. He felt so alone. But let's learn two things from Paul on that. First, he reaches out to Timothy. He writes the letter and lets him know, "If you can make it, I need you here." He lets his friend know, doesn't leave him guessing. And second, he leans on the presence of God with him, as he said,

SLIDE_____) **2 Timothy 4:17**

"But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength..."

With what you are going through, God wants to be with you. If you haven't begun a relationship with him yet, he is not the hold up. He sent Jesus to make that possible, to die on the cross to pay the just penalty of our sin so that we would not have to. He came to make it possible for us to be reconciled to God and for him to be with us and in us always. He is ready to come, but he leaves that up to us. We can say yes or no to what he offers freely—a forever relationship with him. When you say yes, he makes a promise, "I will never leave you or forsake you." He will be with us always, including our darkest times, and not just to be there but to strengthen us and to comfort to help us get through what we are going through. Maybe you already have a relationship with God, but you still feel so alone in your

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trial. Let's go to God together and pray that God will fill you with a sense of his presence, because you are not alone. You are never alone. He is with you, and he is for you.

Let's pray together.

