

You asked for a Sermon on “Spiritual Care” January 6, 2019

Emmanuel showed up in a patient's room to introduce himself and offer whatever Spiritual Care was appropriate. The patient, a woman in her late 40's, responded to his introduction by stating that he wouldn't want anything to do with her and that he might just as well move on to another room. “Why would I not be interested in you?” he asked. “Because I'm a Wiccan by belief, what some call Pagan or even witchcraft,” she replied. “I'm not familiar with this perspective,” explained Emmanuel, “would you be willing to tell me a little about it?” And thus began a tale of the woman's troubled life, hindered by a long-standing chronic illness and some difficult relationships. She explained that she had searched the religious world in hopes of finding some support, but traditional Christianity had not done much for her. Eventually she discovered Wicca beliefs and a small and supportive group of women who gathered regularly for rituals and mutual care. After much listening and a few supportive comments by Emanuel, the patient confessed that many people think of her as ‘weird’ and that they write off her beliefs leaving her feeling more isolated. As the visit concluded the woman told Emmanuel that this was the first time, in a long time, that she had truly felt heard, and she hoped he would come back for another visit.

In the Spiritual Care Education Centre at St. Paul's Hospital this visit was reviewed and Emmanuel was affirmed for his ability to enter the patient's spiritual and emotional space. I was particularly pleased that Emmanuel had come to understand that the provision of spiritual care was not about him, but about the patient. Emmanuel is a Roman Catholic priest, recently loaned to the Saskatoon Diocese from his church in Nigeria. Emmanuel's family had been taught to set aside their indigenous beliefs and to embrace Christianity. The Christian story and the Roman Catholic Church now shaped every aspect of Emmanuel's life. In spite of this background, Emmanuel made listening to the patient's story and to her spiritual worldview the priority in his offering of spiritual care.

This Sunday is the first of four Sundays whose theme has been set by your responses to the title, “You asked for a sermon on ...” One contributor requested that, based on my teaching experience in the hospital, I provide a sermon on Spiritual Care. I have to confess that I chose this topic as my first offering because of the holiday break. Spiritual

Care is a very familiar to me having provided a nationally accredited, 400 hour course to countless students over the past 14 years. If I were to 'boil down' those hours of instruction into one sentence it would be this, "Listen well, and listen with your heart."

Assuming you might want a little more information than that sentence provides allow me to invite you, for a few minutes, into the spiritual care classroom. The first question to answer is, "What is spirituality?" There are countless and varied definitions of this term but the one I would like to share today was written by a Canadian, Peter Van Katwyk, from the University of Waterloo.

Mediation of the (spiritual) is found in living religious traditions celebrated in worship and appropriated in such religious practices, as prayer and meditation. Beyond religious practice, the human spirit is playful and infinitely resourceful, able to engage countless mediators of the (spiritual) in encounters as (different) as a sunset, a piece of music, the loss of a loved one, a warm bath, children at play and the silence of the night.

Peter Van Katwyk, *Spiritual Care and Therapy*

There are more academic definitions of spirituality than Van Katwyks, but I like his because it suggests that spirituality *is* found in religious traditions that are alive and engaging but also, and maybe more so, it is found in the everyday events of life where the heart is moved through a deep connection to nature, to another person or to oneself. When I am engaged in spiritual care with another person I want to hear what moves their heart, what shapes their relationships, what makes life worth living. These are the things of the spirit and I want to show my **care** and offer support that resonates with what is important in the patient's life.

To be truly present, to and for another person, one must be willing to engage in "I-Thou" relationships. This is a term coined a few decades ago by the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber. In his little book of the same title Buber suggests that there are two kinds of relationships: "I-Thou" and "I-It". Allow me a simple example. An I-It relationship is where I treat someone else as an "It" - something I can use but am not in relationship with. A grocery store clerk comes to mind. I don't intend to treat them as an "It" but the transaction is set up so that all I really expect of a clerk is to check and pack my groceries. The temptation to treat another as an "It" is always

before us from the grocery clerk, to the respondent in a call centre, to a needy and seemingly predictable parishioner, even to the person we live with when we really don't want to engage and simply wish they would bring us a cup of coffee. An "I-Thou" relationship invites us to be real with one another, to risk, to be interested, to be vulnerable. I was surprised by a grocery clerk one day who invited me into just such an engagement in the check-out line. As he began to process my groceries he asked me if I had seen the customer in front of me. The clerk explained that he was very distressed because that customer had caused the clerk much suffering during high school, the customer being the school bully and the clerk his victim. I now had a choice – I could ask the clerk how he was doing in light of that encounter or I could simply ask him to wrap my fish separately as he bagged my groceries. That is, I could treat him as another human being worth caring for, or I could retain him as an object in my daily activities.

To provide spiritual care, to provide care, to enact Jesus' call to love one another, we have to engage in I-Thou relationships where a human being (who happens to be a priest) is truly interested in how another human being (who happens to be a Wiccan) is coping with life and surviving despite a chronic illness. I-Thou relationships invite us to see migrants clambering over a wall not as objects to be controlled but as parents or young people desperate for survival. I-Thou relationships invite us to see the person staggering on 20th street not as another nameless addict but as someone who desperately wants to be seen and known as a person of worth. Entering I-Thou relationships are risky for they require us to set aside objectified perspectives (Emmanuel had to set aside everything he thought he knew about witchcraft) and to risk having real vulnerable connections where our view of the world might be challenged. Fr. Emmanuel made listening to the patient's story and to her spiritual worldview his priority, not the advancing his own faith tradition, nor succumbing to his fear of the unknown, nor even his desire for a coffee break. Emmanuel chose to listen well, and to listen with his heart.

Sometimes we fear engaging in an I-Thou relationship because we don't know what will be expected of us or because we feel we don't have the skills. I believe that Jesus defines the task of caregiving in the request to his friends in the Garden of Gethsemane. You will recall that he is distraught because he is being entrapped by religious leaders, threatened by the Roman authorities and worried that he will be persecuted, punished

or even killed. In this moment he asks one simple yet essential thing of his friends: “Keep awake with me.” Solidarity. Companionship.

In my work as a pastor and chaplain I have been asked many times to keep awake with others – during their personal struggles, during their relationship crisis, or at the bedside of a terminally ill patient. Seldom can I fix another’s problem outright. Although I have some counseling skills, some troubles can’t be fixed, just lived through. The disciples could not hold back the Roman guard or prevent Jesus’ crucifixion. I cannot reverse a terminal illness or bind up a marriage that needs to end. I can only keep awake.

Earlier this year Victoria and I learned that our best friend’s daughter and her husband committed suicide. As you can imagine, our friends are enduring unbelievable anguish and heartache. I am not their pastor, Victoria is not their social worker – we have no special rituals, no unique counseling techniques to right this tragedy or to take away their pain. All we can do is keep awake with them. All we can do is listen when they need to talk, accept their endless tears, and in the moments when anguish is punctuated by normalcy we can join them in talking about everyday concerns or remembering a holiday spent together. In these moments we are simply friends with a long history but I recognize we are trying to care for their spirits, we are trying to be as fully present an “I” as possible, to their Thou.

There is no talk of religion between us, no prayer, few references to God but these are spiritual moments. I do not know how our friends experience these moments but I value the description that Martin Buber offers:

When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly,
God is the electricity that surges between them.

Martin Buber, *I and Thou*

This is what Jesus calls us to when he suggests that we love one another – not fix, not cure, not save, not rescue another but love one another. Caring for the spirit is not a perfect science; there are no predictable steps – it is possible to make mistakes, it is possible to grow tired, it is necessary to engage in self-care, but caring for one another’s spirit is a choice we can make, a gift we can give to each another. It begins

with genuine concern for one another; it evolves through deep and intentional listening; it invites us to use our hearts as much, or perhaps more, than our minds; and it might just be the starting point for all justice-making, for all right-relationships, for all inner peace, for all the hopes we have for the world. Jesus calls to his friends to “keep awake with one another.” Might we hear this call in the depth of our hearts, and respond. Amen.

Rev. Brian Walton