

**Being Present
(or Showing Up)**

Scripture

Job Job 2:11-13

Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home - Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust upon their heads. *They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.*

[And then Job's friends do start to speak, telling Job he brought his suffering on himself.]

16: 1-3, "Then Job answered, 'I have heard many such things, miserable comforters are you all. Have windy words no limit?'"

[The second reading, as we prepare for Easter, comes from John.]

John 19:25 "Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophus, and Mary Magdalene."

Message

Good morning, Pilgrim Friends: will you pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, oh God, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Well, Pilgrim Friends, it is great to be with you today – a day that marks a full year of being holed up in our houses thanks to the COVID pandemic.

I think the last time I had the privilege of speaking with you – back in July – the Moffitt Clarks had been making use our time at home to clean up the mess in our house – in our closets and garage and attic and basement. I feel like I should report back to you that one year into COVID-quarantine, we are still cleaning up the mess in our house. But, recently to mix things up a little bit, we've been alternating between cleaning up the mess and watching documentaries. You know, we can't go to the National Parks in person, but we can watch 12 hours of Ken Burns PBS documentaries on National Parks and imagine going in person someday. Fun times at our house!!

One of the documentaries we recently watched with the kids was "Won't You Be My Neighbor," the documentary on Fred Rogers that was released a few years ago – not the film where Tom Hanks plays Fred Rogers – but the documentary with lots of live footage of Fred Rogers in action.

So, with Fred Rogers on my mind, I'd like us to start today with one of Fred Roger's signature exercises. Fred was known to say, and I quote:

“All of us have special ones who have loved us into being. Would you just take, along with me, ten seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are — those who have cared about you and wanted what was best for you in life? Ten seconds of time. I’ll watch the time.”

Let’s do that this morning, Pilgrim Friends, 10 seconds to think of your special people who have loved you into being.

10 seconds. All right. Times up. During coffee hour, after the service, I look forward to hearing about the special people who loved you into being.

One of the people who comes to my mind when I do this exercise is **my** grandma Louise, my mother’s mother. Some of my most precious childhood memories come from the overnights I would spend at my Grandma Louise’s house, when I had Grandma all to myself.

At Grandma Louise’s house, I could eat sugar cereal, and sit in her reclining chair and watch TV with an enormous bowl of popcorn balanced on my lap; and then we’d go to a nearby pond to feed ducks our stale leftover popcorn, and we would play Boggle and rummy for hours on end. But, the best part of Grandma Louise’s house was I got to sleep with her in what felt like the world’s coziest bed. Grandma was soft and warm, and we listen to the easy listening station on her clock radio, and I would eventually fall asleep to the gentle sound of her snore. At Grandma’s house, I felt safe, I felt special, I felt loved.

So, you can imagine how thrilled I was the summer right after I turned 9 – right around Eleanor and Acadia’s age – when Grandma Louise was coming to my house for a week while my parents went away. She was going to get to sleep in my bed, with my stuffed animals. I was so excited I could not sit still at church the morning she was due to arrive: I knew Grandma was going to be at our house when we got home. But, when we rounded the corner heading home from church that morning, I could see that Grandma’s car was not in the driveway. So, I sat with my face against our front window all afternoon, watching for her car. But, Grandma Louise did not come.

Ya’all know where this story is headed. Grandma Louise died of a stroke in her sleep the night before she came to visit me. Now, the blessing, of course, is that Grandma Louise did not die in bed with me with my stuffed animals during her visit to our house!!! Had that happened, we would have had ourselves a whole other level of trauma to analyze today. But, that blessing was cold comfort to the 9 year old whose very special person who loved her into being **was now gone**. I remember feeling like I could not swallow, because the shards of my broken heart had lodged in my throat.

Back to Fred Rogers for a moment. A key part of Fred’s work focused on helping children learn how to manage all the big feelings they feel. And, little 9 year old me was certainly feeling all the big feelings as I sat for grandma’s calling hours in Finefrocks Funeral Home in Mansfield Ohio, a big Victorian structure – there I was, me and my big feelings, sitting alone on a big white sofa at

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the end of a very big room, surrounded by very big people who were talking about very big things.

And, who showed up to Finefrocks Funeral Home, and who sat next to me on the big white sofa? 11 year old Michael Clark. Yes, the same Michael Clark who I marry 16 years later. And unlike Job's Friends, Mike Clark did not cast blame and say things like "You know, she had this coming; she shouldn't have smoked two packs a day." Nor did he make the situation about himself and say, "You know, this is no big deal; my grandfather died two years ago, and I'm fine." Nor did he say "Hey, where's your brother. I really came to see him." He could have said all of those things (and other "windy words" to quote Job), but he did not.

Instead, he sat with me. And what is important is that I **don't** remember what he said, if he said anything. And, what **is** important is that, because of his presence, I felt some of the tiny shards of my heart start to dislodge from my throat, and I could swallow.

Poet Maya Angelou reminds us "people will forget what you said ... but people will never forget how you make them feel."

When I think of that August evening in Finefrocks Funeral Home in Mansfield OH, I think of Mary's companions at the cross – Mary's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene -- who show up to be present with the mother of Jesus during **her** time of **unfathomable** pain and grief. The Bible doesn't tell us what the women said, unlike Job's friends. Perhaps what they said to Mary got edited out, or wasn't deemed important to include. We don't know. But, I like to imagine that, like Mike Clark, Mary's companions didn't say anything. I mean, really, what do you say to the mother whose child is in the process of getting crucified? There are no words. I like to think that Mary's companions didn't make the situation at the cross about themselves (saying things like "you know, when my son died ...") or pass blame (saying things like "you know he had this coming") or fill the air with platitudes, or "windy words". I **like** to imagine those women standing in silence with **Mary**, so that **Mary** did not walk through the valley of the shadow of death alone, so that **she** was not alone as **her** heart shattered. In times of unfathomable grief, **presence**, I think the women at the cross tell us, is more powerful than words.

Or, back to Fred Rogers for a moment, who said "If we can be present to the moment with the person that we happen to be with, that's what's important."

So how do we go about "being present" with others, especially in moments of pain and grief? It's hard. I find it is much easier to make our presence be about ourselves and our ideas and it is much harder to take ourselves out of the equation and make our presence be fully about the person we are sitting with.

So, here I am now, after a year of being holed up in my house, starting to emerge into a world where the sweet spring Lenten air is thick with grief. And as I start to emerge from my house, I draw inspiration from Mary's companions who joined her at the cross. I hope that, as I show up

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for social justice, and as I show up to tend to others' grief, I emulate what I imagine what Mary's companions did for her and what 11 year old Mike Clark did for 9 year old me: to provide a **presence** that is not about **ourselves** and our ideas and our needs and our brokenness, but provide a presence that is healing to others.

Soon we will be out in the world, and better able to be physically present. But, today, we are still holed up in our houses. How can we be present? Ahh, friends, the great gift of the Holy Spirit allows us to be present in prayer when we cannot be present in person; the great gift of the Holy Spirit enables us to show up when we're holed up in our houses through the power of prayer, which crosses space and time. The great gift of the holy spirit allows us to be present when there are no words to say.

With that in mind, let's end by doing a variant of the Fred Rogers exercise that we started with. In Fred's words, "It always helps to have people we love beside us when we have to do difficult things in life." Let's now go in love and in prayer and stand beside someone doing difficult things. Let's end by going in prayer somewhere or to someone in grief – taking ourselves and our needs and our brokenness out of the equation – and for the next 10 seconds let's each be fully present with that that person or that place or that community in their grief ... 10 seconds. I'll start the timer now.

Amen.