Friends in Need

Through the thousands of years that Job’s story has been told, Job’s friends have been much criticized. Their words have been characterized as insensitive and uncaring. If, however, we remember times when we have tried to comfort the grieving or console the sorrowing, I think our judgment of them will be less harsh. Then we will remember how our own attempts at consolation have felt so clumsy, our words so woefully inadequate. Novelist James Worley could have been speaking of Job’s friends, or of us when we have tried to be a friend, when he wrote, “The best one can do in sympathy is fumble at the edges of another’s misery with calloused fingertips and an awkward heart.”

So let’s look together at what Job’s friends can teach us about how we can best befriend those who have experienced loss or tragedy.

Job’s friends are responding to misfortune on an epic scale. One day Job was the richest man around, and the next day he was wiped out. His oxen and camels were stolen. When lightning struck his sheep barn, the entire flock, not to mention the hired hands, went up in smoke. His seven sons and three daughters were having a rousing party when a hurricane came along and made of the house a crumpled tomb for all who were inside. Then Job came down with leprosy. So Job cursed the day he was born—who can blame him?—and prayed for the release of death. And yet, even then his own heart mocked him by continuing to beat.

When Job’s friends heard about all of this, they did what good friends do—they decided to pay a call. Perhaps on the way over to Job’s house they rehearsed in their minds what they would say to him. It is, after all, so difficult to know what to say. When they first saw Job they could not even recognize him. And when they did recognize him—like a living ghost—they were struck dumb. It was Jewish custom that taught them to show their grief by tearing their robes, but their tears came unbidden, rich and natural, as if from a spring in the center of their being. For seven days and seven nights they sat with Job and said nothing, sharing the silence as friends might share a meal.

Then, on the eighth day, it was Job himself who first broke the silence. He opened his heart and torrents of despair rushed out. And when he finished, the seal of silence now broken, each of the friends in turn offered words of consolation. It is hard to determine whether they spoke more because they felt Job needed to hear what they had to say or because they needed to hear it themselves, but I am sure it was a little of both. We all experience the need to order life with words, to make sense of tragedy, even when it is not our own. We want to know there is a reason behind what happens. Every unexplained
tragedy is a threat to our very selves—a threat we may attempt to ward off with our words of consolation.

At the very least, we can say that if Job’s needs were foremost in their minds they would not have chosen the words they did. The balm they applied to Job’s wounds was mostly salt.

One friend seemed to say that suffering is a kind of purification for the soul. He advised Job to use his suffering as an opportunity for self-improvement.

A second friend expressed the conviction that Job’s suffering must be a form of punishment. He advised Job to repent, for if he did God would reward him with a life that was even better than the one he had before.

A third friend said that Job’s trials must be a kind of test of his faith. He told Job that we are not meant to understand what is behind God’s actions, but that is part of the test too—to see if we can worship God even without any understanding.

Although the three friends each tried different ways to console Job and explain his trials, all three struck similar themes: God punishes the evil and rewards the good. God’s mercy is toward those who fear God. If catastrophe has overtaken someone, it must be that the person has sinned. Let him or her repent, and deliverance is sure.

You’ve heard the expression, “the patience of Job,” which comes from the New Testament book of James. But in Job’s own book, he is not exactly patient. Job more than a little impatience with his friends. When they had finished he said, “I wish you’d shut your mouths—silence is your only claim to wisdom.”

In these very words Job points to the first thing we can learn about how to befriend the suffering: we should not be too quick to fill the silence. Sometimes the wisest thing is to respect the silence of the sorrowing, and to share it with them. Silence is part of the language of grief, and we must learn that language if we are to share the sorrow of the grieving. When Job’s friends first came to him they sat in silence for seven days and nights, silence that was punctuated with tears. And though the silence may have been awkward for the friends, I imagine it was nourishing for Job. Then, finally, Job brought his wounds to speech, as the grieving will eventually find the need to do. It is then that Job’s friends felt the need to respond, which was perhaps their first mistake. “If only you’d shut your mouths,” said Job, “silence is your only claim to wisdom.”

When we see a friend who has experienced tragedy probably we would not say just what Job’s friends said, but I do think sometimes we make similar mistakes with our words.

Sometimes we also make the mistake of assuming that our role is to make suffering explainable. We offer reasons why this must have happened. We go with a theory to meet a person—which, in itself, should tell us that our efforts are doomed from the start. In response to tragedy I don’t often hear people say, as Job’s friends did, “God must be punishing him.” More often the words spoken are gentler, even if they are in the same direction, words such as these: “Perhaps this was given to you as an opportunity to grow.”
Or, “This must be part of some larger plan.” One response I commonly hear in the face of death is, “God must have wanted her with him.”

We say one thing, and then another, trying everything we can think of without really thinking through the implications of what we are saying. We try one thing, and then another, like a doctor who knows of no cure so, in desperation, tries whatever medicine is close at hand. But, try as we might, such attempts at explanation are never sufficient. They are too shallow to reach the depths of our need. No one in history has been able to explain suffering, and many have tried. It is an intractable mystery that has eluded the keenest minds and humbled the most faithful souls. To offer explanations is to say more than we know.

Notice also that such explanations are usually offered at the expense of God. God is depicted as a cruel snatcher of souls or as a vengeful punisher of the weak, which often makes the person who has suffered want to have nothing more to do with the very one who can be of most help—that is, God.

And, like Job’s friends, we can sometimes make the mistake of assuming that our role is to give the suffering advice. We may not give the advice, as Job’s friends did, that the sorrowing should repent. But those who have undergone trials usually receive advice from every quarter. Do this. Try that. Get on with your life. Focus on the positive. You need to get out more.

The twenty-one year-old son of a man I knew was murdered, innocently caught in a crossfire of bullets as many who suffer tragedy are merely caught in the crossfire of life. When the father received word of his son’s death, he happened to be at a weekend conference conducted by a nationally famous minister. When he approached the minister to tell him why he had to rush home, the minister immediately gave him this advice: “In your grief, just be thankful for the twenty-one good and long years you enjoyed with your son.” I do not find it hard to understand why this advice did not satisfy the father, for it does not satisfy me. Advice, in the midst of tragedy, seldom does. It lasts about as long as a handkerchief in a blast furnace.

If explanations of tragedy usually belittle God, advice offered in the face of tragedy often belittles our own pain. Advice often ends up implying that a person’s pain is something small, when those who are bearing the pain are more likely to experience it as something overwhelmingly large. Rather than expressing a kind of reverence before loss and sorrow, advice belittles it. After all, if our pain is so easily managed, if all we need do is follow this advice, then that pain cannot be of any great scope or depth. It is difficult to face hardship on a large scale, but it is even more difficult if those around us attempt to diminish it with advice.

We can learn from Job’s friends a lesson in how not to befriend those who have experienced sorrow or tragedy. We should not be too quick to fill the silence of sorrow. Explanations are not called for. Advice is not what is needed. Rather, we must offer something else.
But what might that something be? Theologian Paul Sherer put it well: “The soul in its deep distress seeks not light but warmth, not counsel but understanding.” Which is to say, I think Job’s friends had it right at first. They came to Job and—for seven days at least—they found the courage and faith to share his sorrow, even though they did not have explanations or answers. Courage and faith are just the words I want to use here, for it takes a measure of these virtues to share unexplained tragedy with a friend.

Those seven days Job’s friends sat with him reflect the Jewish custom of sitting shiva. Are you familiar with that practice? In Jewish tradition, a grieving family stays home for seven days and receives visitors, but according to this tradition, visitors sit in silence with the family—unless or until a member of the family addresses them. Only then is a visitor permitted to speak. I think the tradition of sitting shiva is so specific on this point because it is difficult not to fill the silence.

When we are with someone who has experienced loss or hardship we need to trust that our gifts of friendship are sufficient. Before tragedy strikes, our love seems sufficient, our expressions of care seem enough. But when tragedy strikes we often feel as if something else, something new, something more, is required. We feel as if we must now have explanations and answer questions, explanations that were never required of us before, answers that, under normal circumstances, friends are not expected to supply. We seek something new to say or do, rather than trusting that the gifts of friendship, which were sufficient before, are sufficient still.

But such simple gifts of friendship hold great power for those in need. When talking with someone who has experienced loss, what we need are not new magic words. Most often, what we need to say are some of the old words we may have neglected to speak for a time, or which simply deserve to be said again. They are old words that still have a lot of magic in them, words like, “I will stay with you,” “I love you,” and other wordless words that can be quite profound, like an embrace or shared tears.

As I say, often we don’t trust that is enough. People who have been with friends in need, simply sharing the silence and the tears with them, often leave such encounters saying, “I felt so inadequate. I didn’t know what to say. I wish I could have said something or done something.” But listen to those who have been on the other end of such an encounter, those who have received such simple, seemingly inadequate expressions of care, and you hear something quite different: “I can’t tell you how much that meant. I felt upheld. It made all the difference.”

I don’t think I can explain fully why such simple expressions of care can mean so much. That’s a bit of a mystery, as well. But I think it has something to do with this: When we share the suffering of a friend—not remove it or explain it, but simply share it—we reflect something of God’s love and God’s love can somehow work through us. After all, the God of All Comfort explains little, but loves abundantly and shares our sorrow. God is the one who has the strength and courage and love to wade into the powerful tides of our greatest needs, and share our hurt as if it is God’s own. And when we do something like that ourselves, we can be instruments of God.
A friend of mine tells of picking up his daughter from kindergarten. She was late in coming out of the classroom. When she finally appeared she explained to her father why she was delayed. It seems that her friend had worked very hard on a plaster figure that she was looking forward to giving to her parents, but in her excitement she hurried to put on her coat and the plaster figure dropped to the floor and shattered into many pieces. The father said, “So you stayed to help her pick up the pieces? That was nice of you.” “No, Dad,” she replied, “I stayed to help her cry.”

Now that’s a friend.