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12/02/2017 | Monthly Topic

## Sharing God's presence through friends

by Susan Schneider

**When I arrived at school, she had been there a couple of years already. Paula was progressing slowly through her classes, taking just a few every year. She had to. She was still weak. During her first semester, she had been diagnosed with cancer, and had had to have surgery. The operation had been successful, but extremely taxing; she needed to be very careful with her health.**

One night, she knocked on the door of an apartment where a number of us were gathered, eating pizza and watching TV. She came into the room, sobbing and collapsed on the couch. It was her heart, but not in a physical sense — her boyfriend had just ended their relationship.

They had been together before she got sick, during her health crisis, and ever since. And now he was ending it. She said that, in his view, their relationship had changed from a romantic partnership to a doctor-patient relationship. He felt that her illness was becoming as debilitating for him as it was for her.

What could any of us say? None of us had any idea what their lives were like, separately or together. We only knew that she was heartbroken and angry, railing against her fragile body, her former boyfriend and God — all, she felt, were betraying her. "Why is God doing this to me?" she asked. "Isn't my life hard enough? Couldn't God pick on someone else sometimes?" It certainly did seem to us that she was carrying far more than her fair share of suffering.

Our friend was suffering, body and soul. She needed Jesus to heal her, but she no longer had the stamina or will to approach Jesus herself. And so that night, Jesus came to her in our feeble words, our tearful commiseration, and our shared pizza.

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“Then some people came, bringing to [Jesus] a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven. . . . I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.’” (Mark 2: 3–5, 11)

I was a bit stunned by this advice. Don't pray? Don't trust? Don't love God? But now I see what he was offering her: truly freeing and holy friendship.

The evening with my heartbroken schoolmate concluded with one of my classmates taking her in his arms and saying, “You know what? You don't have to have faith right now. You don't have to pray or trust or love God tonight. Let us do it for you for awhile. Let us pray and trust God for you. Let us have faith on your behalf. Tonight, you just rest.”

I was a bit stunned by this advice. Don't pray? Don't trust? Don't love God? But now I see what he was offering her: truly freeing and holy friendship. He was carrying her stretcher to God. He was digging through the roof and placing her in front of Jesus. He was embodying Paul's reminder to the Corinthians that God “consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God” (2 Corinthians 1:4).

It makes me wonder about the paralyzed man in Mark's story. Did he trust in God's goodness and mercy? Or was he just too tired? Did he ask his friends to take him to Jesus the Healer, or was it their idea? Were their friendships straining and cracking under the weight of his sickness?

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I am struck by the fact that Jesus' first move was not to inquire about the man's faith—or even about his health! Instead, Jesus' first inclination was to honor the faith and compassion of the man's friends!

I understood the power of such faithful friendship in a visceral way years later, as I stood weeping helplessly with my head against my best friend Sean's chest. I was moving all my stuff into an impersonal, dusty storage space as I extricated myself from a deteriorating marriage.

Whatever the paralyzed man's circumstances, his friends knew what he needed more than anything in the world: He needed to be brought into the presence of our merciful God.

And Jesus the Healer responded not because “God helps those who help themselves” but because it is the nature of God to heal and renew. The healing that Jesus offered was unlike anything anyone there expected. Jesus first bestows on their dear paralyzed friend forgiveness, and only later adds the ability to walk.

Forgiveness for what? Don't you wonder? Did his friends know? Did he? Maybe, maybe not. But Jesus, who loves all of us more fiercely than even our closest companions, knew exactly what the man needed. And he provided it.

“For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’”

*(1 Corinthians 11:23–24)*

In the year that followed my divorce, Sean was the Body of Christ for me many times. He sent me lavender-scented bubble bath and pretty cards. He called me often, continually offering me hospitality and reassurance.

Often when I was crying, he consoled me by assuring me it was good to cry. He said, “You're a baby-starting life over from the beginning. And what babies do most is cry.” I responded, “That is a great metaphor!” He laughingly asked, “Don't you remember? It's what you told me when I was breaking up with my boyfriend ten years ago!” Our friendship had traversed dark nights for both of us.

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We have remained close because we have taken turns carrying one another's stretchers. When the other was unable (and sometimes even unwilling) to move a muscle, we tore a hole open in the roof. In those hours of pain, what we needed most was not someone urging us make the best of things, to "put on a happy face," but someone to carry us, body and soul, into the presence of the Holy, and place us like a little child into God's waiting arms.

The Body of Christ comes to us in the hands and hearts of our friends. Through us mortals, God holds the hurting ones close, and in our shared mourning, God weeps with the weepers too. Mutual consolation in a time of crisis provides us the much-needed assurance of our worth, the promise of God's presence with us in the darkness.

What my suffering schoolmate needed and what Sean and I each needed when our hearts were breaking was permission to let go, to be sad. And while we were sad, we needed to be reminded that we were precious children of God, deeply beloved, no matter the condition (or even at that moment the existence!) of our faith.

When we pray together, ache together, laugh together, cry together, sing together, and commune together, we are ripping off the roof for one another, bringing each other closer to the heart of God. "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Thanks be to God for the astonishing blessing of friendship!

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12/04/2017 | Faith Reflections, Monthly Topic

## Sharing our faith stories

by Tiffany C. Chaney

**The Bible records countless times crowds gathered around Jesus, and times when individuals came to learn from him and to be healed by him. How did they know to show up? They didn't read a post about Jesus that went viral on social media. Jesus didn't have flyers up in the local coffeeshop. They likely showed up because someone they knew shared their story.**

Mark 1:21-28 tells the story of Jesus, early in his ministry, teaching on the sabbath in Capernaum. There he encounters a man with an unclean spirit, which Jesus banishes from the man. And then, verse 28 says, "At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee." Jesus' fame spread because the people who had gathered that day in the synagogue and shared the good news of the teacher, of the healer, they had encountered. As a result, the people around them wanted to encounter Jesus too.

In Mark 5:24b-34, Jesus is on his way to save a young girl's life. As the crowd pressed in on him, a woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years took the risk of going into the crowd where she knew she wasn't welcome, according to the rules the community lived by. She did so because she believed Jesus could heal her.

She had not watched a YouTube video of Jesus healing the man with the withered hand. The teachings of Jesus were not on Kindle for her to read in her free time. How did she know to follow the crowd to see Jesus that day? Mark 5:27 said she had heard about Jesus. That's how she knew it was worth it for her to be among the crowd that day.

This woman, according to the Levitical standards of her time, would have been ritually unclean,



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untouchable. So who told her about Jesus? Perhaps someone had been willing to put their own concerns aside to go share a word of hope with her. By sharing what they knew about Jesus, they participated in God's plan for healing this woman.

### **Sharing the story, one person at a time**

When we tell our stories, we strengthen and encourage those around us . . . and I believe we strengthen ourselves too.

Recently I was at the local university, meeting with graduate students in a Christian fellowship group. One student talked about hearing from another student about some things they had been dealing with lately. He told the group that he was able to tell his classmate about his own struggles and how his faith sustained him in the midst of them. He said to his friends around the table, "We're not ordained or anything, but we do have a story to tell and we can pray for each other, support each other."

He is right. We all have a story to tell about our encounters with Jesus. Faith conversations are not limited to those who have been to seminary. When we tell our stories, we strengthen and encourage those around us . . . and I believe we strengthen ourselves too.

The students in the fellowship group that day shared stories of financial worries and unexpected provision; stories of struggling with confidence in class, continuing to work hard, and later realizing they were as good as everybody else; stories of maintaining healthy relationships in school. They shared how they experienced God at work in their lives. They shared their faith stories.

How has God called you to participate in God's mission by sharing your faith story? Who would benefit from a word of hope from you today? Who would be encouraged by hearing about the ways the Lord has shown up in your life? Have you ever shared how God is active in your life? Have you ever shared with someone about God's love? Have you ever invited someone to see God active in their life as well?

By simply sharing our stories, we participate in the plan of God. With whom do you sense God calling you to share your faith story today?

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### Discussion questions:

1. Who has shared their faith story with you over the years? How has it nurtured your faith?
2. What story do you have to share? Write it out. It may help you become more comfortable with telling your story to others.
3. Sometimes sharing our story can feel very vulnerable. Are you willing to become vulnerable in order to share your faith with someone else? (If vulnerability is a struggle for you, check out Brene Brown's TED Talk on "The Power of Vulnerability.")

### Closing prayer:

Gracious and loving God, as unique as we all are, so are our stories. Each story is intricately woven with the fine details of life, seasoned with memories – some pleasant, others not so pleasant. In every detail, every memory, every element of our story, you are present. As we share our faith, we witness to your ever-present, ever-faithful, ever-loving accompaniment on our journey. Help us, Lord, to share our faith stories in ways and with people who might come to know you all the more as a result of our witnessing. Show us those with whom you would like us to connect. Thank you for those you have sent to share their stories with us. Together, all our stories are a part of your story, for which we are grateful. Amen.

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