

“I’ve been meaning to ask...What do you need?”
Job 2:11-13

When life hurts, our instinct is to want to swoop in and fix the pain of others. I am reminded of Toy Story 2 when the greedy guy wanted to restore Woody, the cowboy toy, to his original condition. Let’s watch the clip:

<https://youtu.be/HnGsXk1NHBo>.

Sometimes we approach life that way. It would be easy if all things could be fixed that way. But in reality, even Woody the toy needed more than just being physically restored. His friends knew that he needed to be restored to them instead of just having his arm fixed.

We see a similar pattern in the story of Job. His friends wanted to fix him. They wanted his suffering to end. His life seemed unbearable, and it was hard for them to watch that.

We can relate to their need to help fix situations. The only problem is that in our busyness in trying to fix someone, we may not realize what we or they really need. It is a book of wisdom with a story that is told to us about a righteous man named Job. The story begins just like many fairy tales begin, "Once upon a time..." "There was once a man in the land of Uz..." with an emphasis on the innocence and goodness of Job. Even the setting of the story is in the land called Uz which in Hebrew means fertile. So, we come to this story expecting good things to happen. But instead, we hear about the plight of Job where his righteousness is tested. He loses his children, his wealth, and his health. By chapter two, Job is confronted with the eternal problem of suffering. His wife even tells him to curse God and die. The image of the heavenly court of this story is very indicative of the people's understanding of the problem of suffering at the time. We see God sitting in a court-like setting. Satan was an image drawn from the Persian court system. Satan's job was to question every decision that the king made, to ensure that he had thought things through. In that sense, he was an adversary of sorts, but he was simply doing his job. In Job, Satan is not presented as "the Devil," the arch enemy of God. Instead, Satan is presented as a member of the celestial court, one of the "heavenly beings" who attend God and assist in the management of Creation. In fact, in the original Hebrew of the passage, "Satan" is not even a proper name: it is a title, bearing a definite article, "the Satan," meaning "the Adversary" or "the Opposition" or even "the Naysayer." So, with this role of the Satan we see that there is no real explanation of the origin of suffering but an attempt to deal with it by using an image that people at the time would have been able to understand. In fact, the book of Job does not end up giving a real explanation of why people suffer. But what it does is that it negates all the traditional answers that were popular at that time.

So how do good friends respond and help Job? They actually sit with him without saying a word for seven days and seven nights. This is a great example of a powerful response to deep suffering. His friends sit there with him for seven days saying nothing!!! They just sit there. What a great witness to the value of being there with each other without jumping into fixing right away. Later on, the friends falter when they try to “fix” Job. They try to explain the cause of his suffering. They try to make him confess his sins because they

believed that he must have sinned to cause this pain. What would have been more helpful is that if they had asked, "What do you need?"

Jesus gives us a great example of that. In the story of the healing of Bartimaeus, Jesus does not assume knowing what the man needs. Instead, he asks him what he needs. Here it is from Mark 10:51: Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again."

There is power in such a question. It honors the person who is being helped. It also gives us clarity on what we can offer. We are not going to be able to fulfill every need a person may have, but that is not implied in the question. "What do you need?" does not mean that we are the ones to fulfill the need. It may require asking others for help. It may require some more questions of awareness as one does not always know what they need. In the case of Job, he never really gets an answer to his suffering, but he instead gets an awareness of God's presence being with him in his suffering. "What do you need?" could be a great question to ask ourselves in difficult times. Living with such a question for a while can help us become aware of our deeper needs and how God is present in them. Our deepest longings for wholeness are often buried or hidden from us. We sometimes think that we need certain things, but in reality, our longing goes much deeper. It is like when we discover that being tired and being hungry can be confused. We may think that we are hungry, but in reality, we are tired or needing to drink.

In a spiritual sense, we may get confused about our needs and thus when someone holds the space for us to ask this question and to pray about it, we can get clarity.

In his book, *Let Your Life Speak*, Parker Palmer shares the story of the time that he was offered the opportunity to become the president of a small liberal arts college (which was not only his "dream" job but also one that all of his professional colleagues assured him was exactly what he was cut out to be). Palmer visited the college, met with faculty, students, administrators, and trustees, and, before leaving, was told that he would most likely be offered the position. For some reason, though, Palmer wasn't entirely sure. And so, in keeping with his Quaker tradition, Palmer asked several friends to meet with him as a "clearness committee;" a process of discernment that Quakers have used for more than 300 years to seek guidance and clarity when they are facing a personal --or communal --decision, dilemma, challenge, or crisis.

The "clearness" process, Palmer writes, is based on a "simple but crucial conviction: each of us has an inner teacher, a voice of truth, that offers the guidance and power we need to deal with our problems. But that inner voice is often garbled by...inward and outward interference." And so, the purpose of a clearness committee is "not to give advice or fix" people from the outside in, but rather to help a person, by asking honest, open questions, discern the right path by discovering their own wisdom from the inside out.

When Palmer met with his clearness committee, the first few questions they asked him were routine and easy. Then one person asked: "What would you like most about being a college president?"

Palmer answered with a volley of negatives: “Well, I wouldn’t like having to give up my writing and teaching. I wouldn’t like the politics. I wouldn’t like never knowing who my real friends are. And I wouldn’t like having to glad hand people I don’t respect simply because they have money.”

Gently, but firmly, the questioner interrupted: “May I remind you, Parker, that I asked you what you would most like?”

Compelled to give an honest answer, Palmer found himself appalled as the words came out of his mouth. “Well,” he said in a quiet voice, “I guess what I’d like most is getting my picture in the paper with the word president under it.”

That is the power of asking such questions. Life is not always simple, and our motivations are often complex, which means that staying curious is so essential to our ability to listen to God in our lives. We will end with a journaling practice, using the conversation cards you received. Here are the questions/statements:

- When you feel lonely, what helps you feel less alone?
- Share a memory of a time someone extended care for you. What did they do and how did it make you feel?
- Share a memory of a time you tried to extend care for someone else but didn’t give them what they needed. What do you wish you could have changed about that experience?
- Share about a time you have been in a caretaking role. What needs do you have as a caretaker?
- What is your love language?1 (The five love languages are: physical touch, words of affirmation, quality time, gifts, and acts of service.) Name a time when you have experienced this type of love and connection.
- What emotion do you feel most often: shame, fear, or anger? When you are in one of those spaces, what helps you move through those feelings?
- When in your life have you asked for help? Did you get the help you needed?
- Share about a time you needed help but didn’t ask for it. What do you wish you could have changed about that experience?
- What things help make a bad day better?
- What’s a gift (tangible or intangible) you’ve received that you’ll never forget?
- What’s the best gift (tangible or intangible) you’ve given to someone?
- Describe a time when you felt God was near.

Rilke: <https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/live-the-questions>

We will close with a prayer by Macrina Wiederkehr, “It seems to me Lord that we search much too desperately for answers, when a good question holds as much grace as an answer. Jesus, you are the Great Questioner. Keep our questions alive, that we may always be seekers rather than settlers. Guard us well from the sin of settling in with our

answers hugged to our breasts. Make of us a wondering, far-sighted, questioning, restless people And give us the feet of pilgrims on this journey unfinished.” Amen.