CARING for those WHO CARE
a sermon by
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You board a commercial airliner for a trip. The flight attendants begin their pre-flight instructions, and if you are like me and most fliers, you tune them out. You have heard it all before, those instructions you almost certainly will never need to remember: “In the event you need oxygen during the flight, oxygen masks will descend from the overhead compartments. Fix your mask first before attempting to assist another person.

Well, today I ask that you pay attention to those in flight instructions. In a sermon last spring entitled “How and Why to CARE” we looked at some of the theology and practical dimensions of caring. Today I want to focus on the caregiver. So I ask that those of you who are charged with the responsibility of caring for another to listen for those instructions which can save your life and the life of one for whom you are caring: Fix your mask first before attempting to assist another person. And since all of us, in some capacity or another, are caregivers for someone else at some point in our lives, I guess all of us had better remember to Fix your mask first before attempting to assist another person.

Caring for those who care. Who are the caregivers? We all fall into one of two overlapping groups: those who care for others within the Christian community, and those who carry the heavy responsibility of caring for a family member or a close friend. And we are talking about a BIG group of people. There are at least 44 million adults providing care for an older or chronically ill family member. 43% of those caregivers are over 50. As you might guess, the typical caregiver is a woman. While men in crises tend to “fight or flight”, scientists have even identified a gender specific chemical process that propels women in a crisis to “tend and befriend”.

The profile of a US caregiver is a 46 year old woman who works outside her home AND spends more than 20 hours/week providing unpaid care for her mother. Half of all caregivers only have to devote eight hours/week, but 20% of caregivers spend more than 40 hours a week giving care. Such care giving, on average, will last 4.3 years. 83% of caregivers are providing care for a relative – 24% of caregivers live in the same house as they one for whom they are giving care. 61% live more than an hour away. Long term care givers lose about $659,000 in lost wages and earnings, because of their care giving. Informal care giving costs businesses $17.1 billion annually in lost productivity.

There are other, personal costs associated with care giving as well. Care givers are more likely than non caregivers to get infectious diseases. They are more susceptible to heart disease, arthritis, diabetes and cancer. And those tendencies hang around for years after a stint of care giving ends. Caregivers have a greatly increased risk for anxiety and depression. Sometimes they feel guilty for not being with their own families, when they care for another. They often don’t feel like they are doing all they can do for the one within their care. Any of this sound familiar?

So, what can we do? How can we extend care for the caregivers among us? Which is to say, how can we better care for one another?

First of all, caregivers, take care of yourself first. Remember that descending oxygen mask? If you aren’t breathing, you can’t help anyone else breathe.

No less a caregiver than Jesus recognized this truth. Jesus regularly withdrew from the demands of caring for those near and dear to him, and those who sought him out every moment of every day. In our little
story from the gospel of John, we find Jesus finding some down time from the world of care giving (and his world was literally caring for the whole world). He allows his friends to care for him. Martha serves him dinner. Lazarus keeps him company – maybe they talked about the upcoming chariot races. And Mary takes some precious perfume and anoints his feet. Now the evangelist here is foreshadowing and preparing his readers for the sacrifice which was to come, but on another level, the story is about Jesus taking care of himself so he can take care of others. Even accepting an extravagance that could have provided short term sustenance for the poor. Jesus knew how to take care of himself. Do we need any more models than him?

Care givers – if you are to extend the care you want and need to provide, you also need to recognize there are limits to the care you can provide. I know that it easier said than done. I also know that those of you who are caregivers, who make your decisions based on your feelings as opposed to using logic and rational reasoning, will find such words difficult to hear. As a caregiver you want to do the best job you can, you may even feel you have to do it all, and do it all by yourself. But friends, there are limits to what you or anyone can do. Even Mother Theresa couldn’t care for ALL of Calcutta. We all have limitations.

I think another Biblical paradigm of care giving is informative: the Good Samaritan. Now, the Good Samaritan is as good a care giver as you will find in the Bible or anywhere. He saw a need. He acted out of compassion. He risked his own life to save the life of another. This was a guy who knew something about care giving. And what did HE do? Notice the rhythm of the story: The Good Samaritan responds, he retreat, and then he returns to the man and restarts the cycle of care giving all over again. In the crisis of finding a man in a ditch, he drops all other responsibilities and gives his undivided attention and efforts to save the man who had fallen among thieves. He binds his wounds. He stabilizes the situation. He offers him compassionate care. Then he takes him to a nearby inn – and leaves him! Yes, he pays the innkeeper to take care of him. Was he sloughing his responsibilities? Certainly not. Was he turning a cold shoulder on this man he had saved? Of course not. We don’t know what else he had to do, but even the Good Samaritan had other responsibilities that limited the care he could provide. Again, if no less a holy person than the Good Samaritan recognized there are limits to the care he could provide, what about us?

Care giving can be a lonely, isolating time of life. But deep and effective care giving is a function of the community of faith. Think the story of the healing of the paralytic. A children’s favorite. Why? Because even children can recognize that this healing occurs because the man had friends. A paralyzed man seeks healing. But the crowds are such that he cannot be seen, much less brought to Jesus. So four of his friends bring him to Jesus. Carry him up on the flat roof and tear away the thatch so they can lower him down right in front of him. The paralytic’s care giver is not even mentioned. Only his four friends. His community.

So also it is in the Christian community that we can care for one another by giving care to those giving care. From Hillary Clinton’s oft quoted remark we know “it takes a village to raise a child.” So also it takes a village to save a life. It takes a community to care for one needing care. The business world has long recognized this – that is why we have INSURANCE companies – sort of commercial communities for sharing the risk and providing for those in deepest need.

One of my joys in ministry is being part of the support system as you care for one another. Cover for each other. Drive the car. Sit at home with someone who can’t be alone. Run to the store. Fix a meal. It is seldom rocket science. Community care giving is plugging holes in dikes and giving a break now and then to the primary care giver.

And every time we extend care to a brother or sister in need, we do the work of Christ. As the apostle Paul wrote, “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” What is this “law of Christ”? In the gospel of John, Jesus says I give you a new commandment, that is a new law. That you love one another. Or as we read in Matthew, Mark, or Luke, the way of being a Christian is to take up the cross and follow Christ.
Caring for one another. Caring for those who care. Bearing one another’s burdens. That is the heart and soul of the Christian life. That is what a Christian does. A care giver. That is who a Christian is.

In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, “Come unto me, all of you who are burdened and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest.” Care givers: you are never alone in your labors. You always have Jesus with you as well, yoked to you, ready and able to share your burden. Care givers – that is to say – all of you – you are never alone. In the Christian love we have for and with one another, we give care for the care givers. As the old hymn says, “Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love.”

In her book on care giving, The shelter of each other, author Mary Pipher writes, “When you are backpacking in the wilderness, the first rule in any crisis is ‘Don’t panic.’ The greatest danger is losing one’s head. Panic disorganizes thinking and leads to self-defeating behavior. When I backpack,” Mary Pipher writes, “I never travel alone. It’s always good to have someone along to help. These guidelines apply to our present desperate situation as a society. When we panic, we act hastily, make mistakes and get ourselves in even worse trouble. We can work our way out of the woods if we think carefully, talk calmly, and work together.” (252)

By God’s grace, we have been placed into a community of care, a congregation that is an expression of the church of Jesus Christ. You need never backpack alone. Christ is with you. Your brothers and sisters in Christ are with you.

Now, go in peace. And remember to fix your mask first before attempting to assist another person. AMEN.

Mark 2:1-12

1When he returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. 2So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. 3Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. 4And 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. 5When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” 6Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 7“Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” 8At once Jesus perceived in his spirit that they were discussing these questions among themselves; and he said to them, “Why do you raise such questions in your hearts? 9Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? 10But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic— 11“I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” 12And he stood up, and immediately took the mat and went out before all of them; so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, “We have never seen anything like this!”

John 12:1-8

1Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 2There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. 3Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. 4But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, 5“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?” 6(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) 7Jesus said, “Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. 8You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.”
Luke 10:30-37

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?’ He said, ‘The one who showed him mercy.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Go and do likewise.’

Galatians 6:2

Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

Resources for care givers:

http://caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/content_node.jsp?nodeid=2313 The Family Caregivers Alliance
http://www.aarpmagazine.org/family/caregiving/caring_for_the_caregiver.html
Caring for the Caregiver
http://www.aafp.org/afp/20001215/2613.html A practical guide to caring for caregivers