

Sermon May 12th, 2019

Jesus Cares for Us: And That's Okay!

We live in a culture where we are taught to value independence. Where we need to be able to pull our own weight to be seen as a valued member in our community. When we finish school, we are expected to get out of our parent's house, and get a job so we can feed and clothe ourselves. We are expected to save up so we can buy a place. When we get married and have children we are expected to support our family unit. We are expected to save for retirement so we don't have to rely on our adult children. We are expected to take initiative and care for ourselves, because no one else will. We believe that if we all focused on caring for ourselves our society wouldn't have any problems. Right?

Until your boss calls you into their office and says you no longer have employment. You find yourself feeling shame, because you need to go against all you have learned about pulling your own weight, and ask for help. The unemployment cheque comes in the mail. You feel sick to your stomach from all the guilt you carry with you for taxing the system. Day after day you look for a job, but no one is hiring. Except maybe the McDonalds or Burger King. But, there is no way you are going to be able to keep paying the mortgage and put food on the table making \$15.00 an hour. You start to feel worthless, hopeless, depressed.

I have stood at the front door handing out bags to people in need who come in for clothes for the past three years at our annual clothing give away. And every year I see people walking in with their heads low, ashamed, because they have to come and get help from someone else. As much as I want to embrace our culture sometimes I feel our culture is in need of revisions. We have lost that sense of community that for most of human history has been foundational to our survival and mental well being.

Well, if we all focused on caring for ourselves our society wouldn't have any problems. Right?

Until you get really sick and can no longer live on your own. You fight with your adult children for months over the idea of moving into a place where people can help you more around the clock. You don't want to be a burden. You wanted to manage on your own. You start to feel shame as you move

into this new community home. Your car is now in the possession of one of your grandchildren. You feel like your independence is slipping away, and find yourself sitting around the room all day staring at the walls. Depressed.

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Until everything in your life that could go wrong does go wrong and you find yourself struggling to stay above water. You find that your mental health has been severely impacted by all the negative circumstances that have occurred over the past year. You start to feel depressed, which leads to a lack of motivation. You feel shame as you are unable to care for yourself due to this lack of motivation. You feel that your life keeps down spiraling. You want to reach out, but feel worthless. The pain keeps getting worse and worse as you become more isolated.

Again, if we all focused on caring for ourselves our society wouldn't have any problems. Right?

Our culture has taught us that we need to be able to handle this world on our own, and if we need help we are weak, contributing to the problem. Unfortunately, many aging people feel ignored and carry with them insurmountable feelings of shame, because they are not contributing to our society in the way we think people should. Many people with physical or mental health ailments feel likewise as they need to rely on others to survive. People who live in poverty or who are without work struggle to feel worthy. Struggle with these feelings of inadequacy and shame. Since the recession suicide rates in Alberta have gone up exponentially.

Mental health issues have become the most important issue for many nations in the West. And yet, in so many cases, people are stigmatized and afraid to come forward to seek help, because seeking help isn't what we are supposed to do in our culture. We are supposed to handle it on our own. I'll say it again. I believe our culture is in need of serious revisions.

Has there been a moment in your life where you really needed to lean on others for help? I believe all of us here have experienced shame for not being able to carry our own weight. Yet, how many times have we found ourselves living out our cultural bias judging someone else for not pulling their weight. Instead, of offering to help.

As a teenager I really immersed myself in our cultural values. I believed I needed to pull my weight and if everyone else did our world would be a better place. I looked at people who needed help as weak or lazy. Sometimes I still find myself making a judgment, and then think “what am I doing?”

I also know what it is like to need help. When I was 19 I wrecked my back really bad. Part of the reason my injury became so bad, was because I ignored the pain for weeks, avoiding to ask for help. I kept doing the activities that were hurting my back. Popped a few pain killers. Did what I could to mask the pain. What I realized when I had an MRI done was that I had damaged two discs in my lower back beyond repair. I have lived with chronic pain now for seventeen years. It took me a year to learn to walk again without experiencing major pain shooting down my legs.

So, in the early years I needed to set limits for myself. I needed to reach out to people for help and support. I have to be honest I felt insurmountable shame. I felt inadequate. I felt that I failed at life. I needed to lean on my Mom to get by, because I couldn't work full time.

And what made matters worse, people who were closest to me couldn't understand why I was so limited. They often told me to suck it up, or they just stopped hanging out with me. After a while I started to ignore the pain, and suffer in silence.

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The stories we hear in our bible this morning come from a very different culture. The biblical culture valued community first. People didn't feel shame when asking for help.

When Jesus came and offered to be their shepherd they were happy. They welcomed his help with open arms. How often do we welcome God's help with open arms?

God created us to live together, to work together, to help each other out. God created us to be in relationship with God. To depend on God like we depend on our parents growing up. It is actually really healthy to depend on one another. We are reconnecting with our roots as God's creatures.

In our gospel, Jesus offers to care for us and guide us. Jesus is our shepherd. Jesus invites us to let go of that need to be so independent and lean on him for guidance and for healing. Jesus empowers us to care for others, as Peter does when he raises Tabitha from the dead.

Jesus' whole ministry is centered around caring for each other. It is about living in community together realizing that when we come together we can pull so much more weight.

This past week we came together with eight other religious groups to offer clothes to those in need. Many more people are walking through our doors these days feeling shame. Feeling inadequate. Jesus invites us to give these people some love and understanding. To reassure them that they are not inadequate, and that it is okay to ask for help.

The people who have done this clothing give away year after year started to feel tired a couple years ago. It is lots of work. This year we decided to ask for help instead of trying to do it on our own. We had the support of many volunteers as we came together to provide for over 265 people in need. We put that need to be independent aside and asked for help and the fruits of this work were abundant.

Our mental health awareness events and initiatives in this congregation, in our city, and in our synod, are where we recognize the complexities of life and that we can't do it all on our own. So, we gather for support. We learn and grow. We care for one another. We are changing our culture.

Today is Mother's Day. Today we recognize those people in our lives that have cared for us. Those we have depended on for knowledge and support. Those who have imitated Jesus for us.

Like Peter, Jesus cares for us, inviting us to let go of all that need to be independent and to lean on him for guidance and care. When we embrace Jesus' caring and guiding love we no longer feel ashamed. Instead, we are liberated to imitate Jesus. Caring for others in the same way Jesus cares for us.

Let us pray, caring God. Thank you for sending us Jesus our shepherd who takes away our shame and gives us new life. Give us the wisdom and understanding to not shame others, but care for them in their time of need. Becoming the community, you always envisioned us to be. **Amen.**