

"Say What You Need"

Sermon preached Reverend Carolyn Patierno

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Let me introduce you to these beloved friends of mine – my Sisters in ministry. Five of us went to seminary together in Berkeley and the other married one of the five (she having attended Caitlin's alma mater). We live in Victoria, British Columbia; Boulder, CO; the San Francisco Bay Area ... and SE CT. Through the pandemic we met on Zoom every other week and we continue to do so. This circle of friends is a gracious and hilarious lifeline.

Over three years ago we planned a retreat. We were to meet in Boulder in April of 2020. You know how that turned out. Finally, we all made our way last month. We jumped and danced for joy upon our arrival at the sweet cabins that would be our homes. Who could believe we were finally all together, in person, for three glorious days?

And it was glorious. Easy. So easy. Despite that there were six of us in close quarters; that there were nine meals to plan around various dietary needs; despite that we were each dealing with jet lag of some sort. And still: it was so easy. How was that possible? The reason was the inspiration for this sermon: each of us is comfortable saying what we need. As Perry the Porcupine finally learned, "Friends should always tell each other how they really feel and what they need."* AND – and this is important - none of us expects any others of us to know what any one of us needs magically or by osmosis or reading minds. AND – this detail is important, too - each of us was okay with whatever the expressed need might have been. AND ... the needs expressed were, you know, reasonable: I need to sleep later. I need to rise with the sun. I need to eat a big breakfast. For me, a slice of toast will do. I need a nap in the afternoon. I need to take a long walk then. I need a specific schedule. I need some flexibility.

Flexibility. Generosity. Laughter. Reasonableness. All of these helped to get us to "So easy".

Poor Perry the Polite Porcupine. He, like many of us, was nervous about saying what he needed even though his need was reasonable: he wanted to read his new book in peace and quiet. But he didn't know how to say it. He didn't know

that he *could* say it. He was afraid that saying what he needed was impolite, that there would be hurt feelings.

Does that ring a bell for anyone here this morning? I think women especially have that nagging voice that says, "Be nice." Which, apparently means, don't say what you need because: all the reasons. You don't want to be too demanding. Impolite. Hurt someone's feelings.

It's exhausting. Conversely, saying what we need fills us up with life-giving energy.

And ... it is most definitely a learned skill. A hard-won learned skill.

And to be clear, saying what we need isn't the same as asking for help, although for many of us, both are hard to do. Actually, saying what we need preempts the need for help in many cases because you're taking care of yourself. Saying what we need has a calming effect on our minds and hearts. It keeps resentment at a comfortable distance. Even when others aren't able or just don't respond in a way that we hope: still – we have the satisfaction of having put our needs out there at least. Of knowing that we took care of ourselves.

Here're two stories for you ...

In my tumultuous late 20s, my life as I had known it was unraveling. I walked on wobbly ground. One afternoon I was out in the neighborhood where I worked and I ran into a man I'd been involved with years earlier. He lived halfway across the country and so we were both taken aback by this happenstance encounter. I was in a hurry to return to my office but promised to be in touch so we could get together while he was in town. But even as I made this promise, my stomach was in knots. I did call him and with that phone call, my life changed and this is why: for the first time in my young life, I pushed through awkwardness and complexity and with a pounding heart, I said what I needed. I was honest in the saying. I said, "My life is in turmoil. I have no capacity for light conversation and I can't share what IS happening with me with you. We can't get together." The conversation took less than five minutes. The nerve to say what I needed took 28 years. I still had more to learn but I was on my way.

If we're lucky, the nature of our closest relationships shift for the better when we learn to say what we need. They become more authentic. Relaxed. Even with those we love the most. Here's how I know.

Many of you know that in 2012 I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. I had surgery and then six rounds of chemotherapy were proscribed, one every three weeks. My mother and father had come up for the surgery. My mother was in the room with Kate and me for several discussions with my doctor. In short, my mother was deep in the forest with us. Just before my chemo treatments were to begin, she called me. With a sensitive but determined tone of voice she said, "You're about to start treatment. Everyone needs to say what they need."

This statement signaled a definite shift in my family system. I was taken aback. (It's the second time you've heard me say that.) Well, I said, you seem to know what you need and it seems you called to tell me. So, what do YOU need? She said that she needed to be at every one of my chemo treatments. I took a deep breath. Pause. My mother's stated need hung in the air for a moment until she asked, "So, what do YOU need?". I took another deep breath because this definite shift was disorienting and I said, "I need to do the first hour and a half alone." And for emphasis I added, "By myself." Another pause. We had a deal. Each of us was truly okay – albeit each of us slightly taken aback by the other's stated need. It was the beginning of a new phase of my relationship with my mother.

My treatments started at 9:00 a.m. My beloved mother walked into the infusion room by 10:28 every *time*. I gave her the two minutes.

We are all tired, Dear Souls. Two years of pandemic life now makes the beforetimes seem like a distant dream to which we will never return. Our beautiful and mutilated world breaks our hearts a thousand ways to Sunday. Here's a powerful mantra that I invite you to say with me: I will say what I need.

Here's what saying what you need does when in religious community here at All Souls. It is an antidote to resentment, especially when tending to the work of the congregation. Helping to keep All Souls going should be a connective and nourishing experience. Somewhere along the way, you may've noticed that when behavior is tempered with a good dose of resentment and general

grouchiness, the air in the room grows stale. Healthy relationship suffocates. All of which is contrary to building and sustaining beloved community.

We don't want to be like that.

Here's an example of how two Souls saying what they needed and what they needed was met with acceptance, creativity and flexibility.

Years ago, Maggie Clouet and Laurel Holmes were both serving on All Souls' Board of Trustees as at-large members – meaning neither was an officer of the Board. After their first year, each was approached to serve as the Board president and each of them said that they didn't have the capacity to serve as president considering their work, family, and community commitments. We call this the “sacred no.” The sacred “no” is a way of saying what one needs. In response, there rose a creative counter offer: would you consider serving together as co-presidents? As you know, Maggie and Laurel graciously accepted this new model of leadership and in doing so – in saying what they needed – All Souls was served in a new and dynamic way. And, a happy consequence was the friendship that grew between these two wonderful women.

We are one, after all, you and I;
Together we suffer,
Together we exist,
And forever we will recreate each other. Pierre

We are, indeed, one. As we seek to create beloved community, we do, indeed, recreate each other. And we create the best versions of ourselves and each other when we courageously say – even when taken aback – say what we need.

Remember the mantra, dear Souls.

Blessed be. Amen.

*A reference to *Perry's Not-So Perfect Day*, the story for all ages. By Sarah Dawson - Illustrated by Deborah Colvin Borgo

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