



Caring for Others

The first persons in space went all alone, one at a time, in capsules just large enough for one person. Never before had a human being been so far from other persons. Did this mean that such a space traveler was one of the loneliest persons who ever lived? No, indeed!

Why? Because others let him know that they cared. There were literally millions following his progress, interested in where he was and what he was doing, mentioning him in prayer, wishing him well.

Though we live our own lives, encased in our private “capsules,” so to speak, we need the supportive, personal care of others. Care is as essential to human life as food and drink. There are no more despairing words than these: “Nobody seems to care.”

Three times the risen Christ asked Simon Peter, “Do you love me. . . ?” And each time Peter answered, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” “Tend my sheep,” was the Lord’s response (John 21:15-17, NRSV).

Who and how?

To be a disciple, a follower of Jesus, means to care for others. But how? Care is not general goodwill toward humanity. It must be specific. Jesus’ own example shows his attention to individuals: He lifts a child up to eye level. He selects a particular person in a crowd for a word, a touch, or a shared meal.

When I ask, “Who needs caring?” the obvious answer is *everyone*. But when I ask, “Who needs me to care *today*?” certain persons come to mind. If not, I need to start with prayer. Praying may be the beginning of caring. A small but surprising list of persons appears in my thoughts. Some are lonely, aged, weak, or in trouble. Some are successful, important, young, and strong.

As my prayers reach out to them, I think about what each may need. The answers vary: a letter, a phone call, a smile, a bowl of hot soup, money, healing, an introduction to another person.

Of course, I can’t do everything. But that doesn’t mean I should do nothing. I can’t care for *everybody*. But that doesn’t stop me from caring for *somebody*. I can’t keep track of everyone I know, but I can respond to those in special need.

I might assume that a widely known and respected person would not want or need or appreciate my care. Not so. Once a popular bishop had to cancel a scheduled event because of a blizzard. The only other available date was on a holiday. “But we wouldn’t want to bother you then,” said the parties involved.

“Please don’t say that,” he answered. “Nobody invites a bishop on a holiday. Everyone thinks we are with somebody else. “No one is too important to appreciate care, or to know sadness when others forget.

Excuses, excuses

What, then, stops me from being the caring person my Lord wants me to be? Excuses take many forms:

Someone else can do it better. Yes, there is always someone who can do something better than I, but there is no one who will speak *my* words or reach out *my* hand, or say *my* prayer.

Trained persons are paid to care. But that’s the very reason my untrained, unpaid, unexpected efforts may be important. Someone may need the pleasant surprise of discovering that I took some time for him or her when I wasn’t required to do so.

Their need is too remote for my own experience. But must I wait until I have had a broken leg, or divorce, or heart attack to minister to those in similar trouble at this moment? No!

Their need is too close to my experience. Perhaps others will think I’m seeking warmed-over sympathy for myself. I shouldn’t parade my past every time someone else suffers a pain that is familiar to me. To reveal or retell my own experiences may be

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appropriate at times. At other times it may not be. Whether or not, the need to care still remains.

I never know what to say. There are no magic words, there is no prepared script, to help a caring person sound wise. But wisdom isn't what most people need. The caring touch or glance or ear of a person who chooses to "be there" in an authentic way is the clue that Christ has sent that person.

I don't want to be in the way. Just as there is a time to be someplace, there is a time to move on. Sometimes an exit itself can be a form of caring. Sometimes my departing shadow will speak most clearly to the one in need. "He came." "She cared."

We are never left all alone to care for another. God cares. God's concern for the other person's well-being was there long before we became interested. God's care is stronger, wiser, and more enduring than ours can ever be. But people often understand and experience God's care most deeply when it is transmitted through caring human beings.

The loving God cares for us all. This same God calls us and empowers us to care for others.

Adapted from a leaflet written by Donn Downall for Discipleship Resources.