

Today we start the second week of our “Stick and Stones: The Things We Say” Sermon Series. More than any other week, I think all of us have said this phrase: “You will be in my thoughts and prayers.” I know that I have. We say this phrase to communicate with those we care about that we will continue to think about them and lift them in prayers of intercession. I also believe that when we say this phrase, we really mean it. We do think about our loved ones and we do pray for them.

Although the origin of this phrase is unknown, it gained momentum after the Columbine shooting in 1999.<sup>i</sup> It seems these were the only words we were able to utter as a nation after this unspeakable tragedy. In my study of this phrase, I also learned that it is uniquely American and not used in other countries.<sup>ii</sup>

As we reflect today on this phrase: “You will be in my thoughts and prayers,” we will see how Jesus Christ calls us to respond to our neighbors who are suffering.

I believe that the desire of our heart while using this phrase is to connect with those who are suffering. It is our attempt to show compassion. Kate Bowler, the author of “Everything Happens For A Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved” gives us some additional examples in her book of actions we can take instead of saying these words.

When Kate was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer at age 35, she shared that people wanted to make meaning out of her diagnosis. They said many things to her including: “God has a better plan...At least you have you son...At least you’ve had an amazing marriage...God needed another angel.”<sup>iii</sup> Yet responses like this, as Kate reminds us, are not helpful to utter to someone who is suffering, nor are they biblical. Kate reminds us that there are more impactful actions that can be taken while someone is suffering that will remind them of God’s presence and embody our identity as the community of God.

Our Gospel lesson from Luke 10 shows the relationship Jesus developed with Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus, and how later he responded to their suffering with compassion and action.

Today we read once again the Scripture about the sisters Mary and Martha. This is probably a more familiar parable to us. Here we see type A Martha running around the house trying to make sure everything is perfect for Jesus. Then we see her type B sister Mary who sits at Jesus’ feet. Which personality type are you?

This Scripture sets the stage for us to see how Jesus was making disciples out of these two sisters with the relationship he was building with them and their brother Lazarus. This passage is important for what happens next.

We see that in this scripture Martha questions Jesus with a why question. “Why do you not care that my sister is not helping me?”<sup>iv</sup> Jesus told Martha not to worry about making everything perfect, but to spend time with him, just as Mary was doing.

Later in Scripture in John 11, we again see Martha questioning Jesus with a why question. “Why did you not come sooner?”<sup>v</sup> She was upset. She was grieving and looking at her personality from the other scripture, she was probably the one who had taken on the responsibility of the household to make sure everything was getting done after Lazarus had died. I think she was probably tired and stressed out too.

Martha had a lot on her shoulders, and she reached out to Jesus for help and she was upset that Jesus did not respond in the way she wanted and she made this known to Jesus. She told Jesus, “If you would have been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21).

Mary took a different approach to her grief, instead of responding in anger, she responded in denial. She tried to shut out the whole world. We hear that Mary had stayed behind and did not run out to greet Jesus when he arrived after her brother had already been dead for four days. Now we don’t know what she was doing back at the house, but I believe she may have been deep in grief and unable to get out of bed. She may still have been in the shock phase of grief.

Then we see how Jesus responded to Mary, who was grieving. Although Mary did not run to meet Jesus, Jesus called for Mary to come and see him...and she got up and went to see Jesus. What is also beautiful in this Scripture is that the community who was grieving with her came along. She was not alone; her community was with her.

Now Mary came to see Jesus, but she wasn’t particularly happy to see him. She said to him the same thing as her sister, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:32b).

It was when Jesus had this encounter with Mary, who so attentively sat at his feet the last time he visited, that he was moved deeply and began to weep.

Jesus’ response to suffering was to cry with those who were suffering. This is a completely appropriate and biblical response to those who are suffering. So often we think that we must be strong for the person suffering, and we are afraid to show our grief so as not to overshadow their grief, but Jesus calls us to grieve with those who are grieving, this is powerful action from Jesus. We also see this in the community’s communal grief as they sat with Mary.

This verse about Jesus crying is so comforting to us because it calls us to remember that Christ weeps with us when we are grieving. It also reminds us that instead of saying you are in my thoughts and prayers, we don’t have to say anything at all, but we can offer our presence. We can simply sit with those who are suffering and embrace them and cry. It’s okay to not know what to say.

In her book, Kate Bowler talked about the countless friends, colleagues, and family that held prayer vigils for her throughout her surgery and recovery. These prayer vigils were particularly meaningful as Kate experienced the power of prayer and the love of God. She was floored that people were actively grieving with her about the news, and yet that they still had the audacity to pray for a miracle. They still held onto the hope and promise of new life that comes through our faith in Jesus Christ.

I know for myself; it was very moving for Nelson and I to receive card after card, from you, and from our family and friend when he was going through his cancer diagnosis and surgery. In that act of sending cards, we received mercy and compassion during a difficult time in our lives. We are thankful for the action of love you took toward us during that time in our lives.

It reminded me that the people of God are always looking for helpful and fruitful ways to respond to suffering and tragedy.

In the Old Testament, we see how the people of God responded to a tragedy. In the book of Esther, we see that Queen Ester heard from her uncle Mordecai that the evil Haman was trying to get all the Jews executed. The King had already signed a decree to make this happen, but Esther wasn’t ready to give up.

She formed a plan of action. She said: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16).

Esther realized that thoughts and prayers were not enough, she was called to take action, and the action she took saved the lives of her people; but she did not take action alone, she took action with the community of God. Together, they fasted and prayed and Esther used her position of power and privilege to make a difference and save lives.

We see later in the book of John, after Jesus offered compassion to Martha and Mary, that he took action. He raised Lazarus from the dead. He showed that he could defeat death and foreshadowed what he was about to do a short time later.

**The good news for our lives today is that Jesus is calling us, like Mary, to come and rest in the presence of God.** God is calling us to take action, although that action may look different than we had originally thought.

We too are called to take action in the midst of suffering and tragedy. Instead of using the phrase “You are in my thoughts and prayers” we are called to sit beside people during their grief and suffering. We are called to pray with them in person or over the phone.

Like Mary in Luke 10, we are called to rest in the presence of Christ where we are strengthened for the journey of discipleship. When tragedy occurs, we are all called, just like the Jews in Esther, to have prayer vigils where we pray, where we cry, and where we fast for the glory of God and on behalf of our neighbors.

There are also some additional helpful things we can do to journey with those who are grieving.

- 1) Find time to spend with the person who is grieving.
- 2) Pray for and with the person grieving. I understand that some folks are afraid to pray out loud in front of someone else, but perhaps, like Esther, God is calling you “for such a time of this,” to make yourself vulnerable in this action, so that the one you are caring for can benefit from this way you can spiritually care for them.

Some of the most beautiful prayers I have ever heard are from congregation members.

I was floored this week, as before I left the retreat, one of my friends offered to pray for me. She spoke powerful words over my life. Prayer is powerful and prayer still makes a difference in our lives in amazing ways!

- 2) Become the contact person for the family of those who wish to bring food as an expression of their love.
- 3) Talk about the loved one they have lost and that impact they made on your life.
- 4) As people lose their loved ones, they may need rides, or find comfort in having others come to appointments with them. In this way, we can be advocates for our loved ones and another set of ears as they are hearing about upcoming appointments and treatment options.

Just as Esther was called to be an advocate for her people, we too are called to take action. Inherently thoughts and prayers are not a bad thing in themselves, but they should always be paired by in person actions and the furthering of a relationship.

As a church may we continue to rest in the presence of God, like Mary, and take action to care for those who are suffering. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

#### **Endnotes**

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.dictionary.com/e/history-phrase-thoughts-prayers/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/10/thoughts-and-prayers-vs-policy/542076/>

<sup>iii</sup> Kate Bowler. *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Love*. Random House Publishing. New York: NY, 2018. P. xvi.

<sup>iv</sup> NRSV. Luke 10:40.

<sup>v</sup> NRSV. John 11:21.

#### **Additional Resource**

Keck et al. *The New Interpreter's Biblical Commentary*. Vol. IX. Abingdon Press. 1995. P. 227.