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Sermon Title: Pastoral Care: Our Heart
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Luke 8:40-48

Luke 8:40-48

Now when Jesus returned, the crowd welcomed him, for they were all waiting for him. Just then there came a man named Jairus, a leader of the synagogue. He fell at Jesus' feet and begged him to come to his house, for he had an only daughter, about twelve years old, who was dying. As he went, the crowds pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years; and though she had spent all she had on physicians, no one could cure her. She came up behind him and touched the fringe of his clothes, and immediately her hemorrhage stopped. Then Jesus asked, 'Who touched me?' When all denied it, Peter said, 'Master, the crowds surround you and press in on you.' But Jesus said, 'Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me.' When the woman saw that she could not remain hidden, she came trembling; and falling down before him, she declared in the presence of all the people why she had touched him, and how she had been immediately healed. He said to her, 'Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace.'

I was in my doctor's office this week, and on the wall there was a lovely framed thank-you note to the doctor, written by a grateful Fairfield woman. It seems that the letter-writer's mother took sick in the Caribbean and was medevaced to Bridgeport Hospital on Christmas Eve at 7 o'clock in the morning. My doctor left the comfy holiday family joy of Christmas to be there at the hospital and stayed there with her until the patient was settled.

In church terms, that was "pastoral care." Being there for someone at just the right time. At Greenfield Hill, we believe that is at the heart of what we do. Pastoral care is attention to detail, one person at a time. It's not original with us. It's what any good church does, and we could agree that it has two roots.

First, it's what Jesus did. Second, it's what my father did. I've often told you that most of what I do as a pastor I learned from my father. Whatever I do right, I learned from him. Whatever I do wrong I learned on my own! And with my father, he never lost sight of the individual, the person.

My most consistent memory of my father at work was his going out to be with somebody, some family, some person in some personal way. I don't remember him in the pulpit or at some meeting or in the classroom. I remember him being with people. Sometimes I went with him.

There was a couple he used to visit regularly. I could tell they used to be a handsome couple by the photos on the wall taken when they were younger. I remember one photo from the early 1940s. He was so handsome in his navy uniform, and she was cuddled in his arm. In the war, his ship was torpedoed, blown to smithereens; and this man was badly damaged inside and out, totally destroying his metabolism and psyche. By the time I met him, he weighed 400 pounds, totally disabled, and could barely get around. They couldn't come to church. They couldn't help the church. They could barely give to the church. But my father visited them regularly, taking food, taking prayer, taking me. Maybe to show me what being a pastor is all about.

In religion, it's easy to get caught up in ritual, program, church as an institution, an organization, church as a business. And guess what! Those are important! This *is* a business. We have employees and bills to pay and property to maintain. And we are also a religion, subject to the rhythm and flow of weekly worship and seasonal holy days and extra liturgies like weddings and funerals.

"Yes" to the religion part, "yes" to the business part. But at Greenfield Hill Church the heart of all we do is you, doing all we can to look after one another, to be there. You can tell a lot about a church, I would guess, by looking at what Bible stories seem to get repeated. Certainly for us, one of the most telling is the story of Jesus healing a woman with a hemorrhage of blood. This perpetual bleeding was the bane of her existence. It was debilitating, it was isolating, it was humiliating, it was frightening. She had no life.

The Bible tells us this wonderful story. She heard Jesus was coming to town, so she got up her courage, bundled herself up, went out into the public in order to get close to Jesus. When she got close, she bent way down close to the ground. All she wanted was to touch the hem of his garment. She wasn't trying to bother him. She was too afraid to interrupt him or talk with him.

She just wanted to touch him. Amazingly, Jesus is startled by her touch, and he blurts out, "Who touched me? I felt virtue, power, go out from me!" The disciples are amazed. They say, "What do you mean, 'Who touched you? Look at the crowd, everybody pressing in on you, how can you possibly single out one person?'"

And, of course, that's precisely the point, isn't it? There was a crowd, he was hugely popular, everybody wanted a piece of him. But Jesus sensed the touch, the need, the presence . . . of one person.

Did you see Derek Jeter's last hit at Yankee Stadium Thursday night? Bottom of the 9th, tie game, man on second, Jeter singles, the run scores, the Yankees win!! A storybook ending to an amazing career. Then came bedlam. The whole team mobbed him, everybody jumping up and down, 50,000 people screaming, old teammates coming up to hug him, the press is after him, people literally tugging on him . . . and Jeter breaks away to go over to his mother and touch her hand. One on one. Fifty thousand people celebrating, chanting his name, but Jeter was focused on one person.

Our Adult Ed board has been hosting a series of films with a religious or faith or spiritual theme. So we all pay closer attention to new films. One that I recommend is "Calvary," a modern-day parable set in Ireland, featuring some of the great Irish actors of our time. In the opening scene, this older Irish priest is hearing confessions. He's sitting in that little wooden confessional box, and the anonymous voice on the other side tells him he's going to kill him, the priest, in one week. One week. You might expect that the rest of the movie would be a detective story, trying to smoke out the bad guy, the anonymous would-be killer. But the priest isn't a detective. He's a pastor. So instead, he does what he's always done. Pastoral care.

He spends the week out and about with his people. Sometimes in a house. Sometimes in the hospital. Sometimes at church. Sometimes in prison. Sometimes even in the local pub. He spends his week one on one, entering into the lives of his congregation. Given the title, "Calvary," the movie is an obvious parable about the life of Jesus. But even more, it is a beautiful testimony to the simple power of "being there" . . . of pastoral care. Pastoral care is the effort we make to be one on one, to sense that need, that touch, and to prioritize it over the press of everything else.

I'm a statistics nut. Actually, I'm a baseball nut, and more than any other sport, baseball loves statistics about anything. *The New York Times* had a front-page sports section article on the number of swings, *of swings*, Derek Jeter has taken during his entire career, including spring training, including

mid-winter conditioning. Baseball nuts are statistics nuts, and that means me.

So even in church, I keep track of everything. I'm going to give you some stats about pastoral care, but don't misunderstand me, I'm not begging for approval. I'm only emphasizing with statistics that we're serious about pastoral care. When I came here some years ago, one of those first years I had about 1,200 pastoral care contacts, including, I think, 93 in the hospital. And everybody thought that was terrific. Deacons were happy, Annual Meeting was happy, everybody was happy. Again, I'm not looking for praise. I'm just letting you know how it was so you'll catch my point. I did 1,200 one year, including 93 in hospitals, and you thought that was good.

This year, it will be over 3,000, including over 400 hospital visits, and that's just me. Alida is out there all the time, in and out of everybody's life, making that Jesus-style connection, Oh, and let me add this. Rachel joined our ministry this summer, and one friend said, nicely, "It's wonderful that Rachel is here, now David can cut back." No, Rachel is not here so I can cut back. Rachel is here so that we can do even more.

We are not a "cutting-back" kind of church. We have taken as our motto "the second mile, the second touch." That's the kind of church we are. If 93 was good once upon a time, 400 is what is needed now. And if 400 is good now, 400 plus Alida plus Rachel is even better.

Now, back to my point. Every January I write a report for the church's annual report, and every year I make two key points. One from the Bible, one from me. The one from me says, "Numbers, statistics are people, each number represents a real, breathing, living person doing his or her best to work through all the challenges of life. We don't do numbers for numbers' sake."

If we report that we did 30 funerals last year, that's 30 times we went through the sorrow and heartache and even pain of sickness, dying, death. Thirty times we sat with heartbroken, grief-stricken loved ones, listening to their stories, sharing their tears, clinging to faith. Each one is one. *One*. One of 30. Not one of 400. Not one of 3,000. One.

That leads to the other key point in my annual report. Usually right there at the top I quote that seminal verse from St. Paul, "Weep with those who weep, rejoice with those who rejoice." That's as good a summary as you can get of what we do. That's why we go to field hockey games and high school concerts and Boy Scout Eagle awards. And that's why we go to the hospitals,

the courthouse, the nursing homes. That's why we get out of bed in the morning.

Each day somebody's going to be weeping, and somebody's going to be rejoicing, and each one would like somebody to care. You may remember I had to be reminded of that personally. I've told you before when I had my double knee replacements, I told Alida, "No visitors. None. No one. Nobody. I don't want anybody walking into my room with flowers with me sitting there in one of those obscene open-backed hospital gowns. No cards. No visitors. No flowers. Leave. Me. Alone."

So after my surgery, Alida drops me at the nursing home for my two-week rehab. And the next morning, Mike Howard walks in with the altar flowers he brought me. And Jack Barry sneaks in a whole Chicken Parmigiano from my favorite restaurant, Luigi's. And two weeks later, when I escape from my prison, the whole West family walks into my house with dinner for all of us. They sat down with me, like a family. Every time I went to rehab, someone took me, someone brought me home, and every day someone brought dinner. It was a little slice of heaven. Why? Because it was personal, one on one. It was my church family, giving pastoral care to me. I didn't even know I needed it. I didn't know I wanted it. But I loved it.

Let's go back to that Bible story again. Jesus was standing there in the middle of a crushing crowd, and he senses a single touch. He feels the uniqueness of one person. How? Jesus says, "I felt virtue go out from me." Some translations call it "power" or "energy." I like the old-fashioned "virtue." Whatever, Jesus felt a transfer of something good between him and that anonymous woman. Something mystical, something personal, something good. A virtue. Maybe in today's language we'd call it a "rush." It feels good.

Alida and I get to have that feeling 5,000 times a year! Seriously. I don't think we've ever left a soccer game, a hospital, a nursing home, a prison, a counseling session, a visit in our office, or your home without feeling it was good. I'm not saying it's always happy, or even always successful. But it's always good. A virtue.

We are there right after babies are born. We are there just minutes before someone dies. We have been in recovery rooms and rehab rooms. We are there the exact moment a marriage gets started or a new job. And we're there when life unravels all the way to when it starts to come together again. Graduation parties, 50th wedding anniversary parties, prom parties, end-of-chemo parties, retirement parties, new-house blessings; when hospice care comes, when the moving van comes, when a tree falls on your

house, when a daughter gets engaged, when you just read a book that opened your eyes and you just have to tell somebody. And all those times we feel "virtue" go out and come back, a two-way exchange of something good.

Many years ago, a young woman came to see me. She wanted to know if we'd baptize her baby. There was no father in the picture, just a young single mom. For the record, she gave me the father's name, Arnold Dorsey, which didn't mean anything to me. We did the baptism in church, a joyful day for everyone. Soon the mom was teaching Sunday School, helping out with Vacation Bible School. One morning I opened the *New York Post* to a story that read, "Queens Sunday School Teacher Has Engelbert Humperdinck's Love Child." I don't think I was ever prouder of a church than I was that week, when everyone stuck by her. To the public she was a "Page Six" bold-print, juicy scandal. She was a story. A celebrity. To us she was just a mom, a Sunday School teacher. A person. We felt "virtue" go out from us, something good, back and forth.

Let me also tell you one more thing. It is an incredible honor the way you welcome us into the depths of your lives. We mean that. It is an honor that you welcome us, trust us, use us.

I once pastored a church, a nice church, but they had a peculiar view of church. The church elders told me, "Please don't visit us. When we want you, we will call you and make an appointment. Until then, just do your church work." O.K., I was like a "minister on retainer." They were missing the best part. Pastoral care simply means that you are important in our lives, Alida's and mine, and we are welcome in your lives. That's the "virtue" we share together.

Here's what the Bible teaches from Ecclesiastes Chapter 4, verses 9-12: "Two are better than one. If one falls down, the other can help them up. Pity the person who has no one to help. If two lie down together, they keep each other warm. How can you keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves."

That's not a bad image of pastoral care. We "keep each other warm." We "defend each other." We "help each other up."

Now, *that's* "church work."