

“Needs”

a sermon by Dan Lillie
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Recognizing Our Needs

After being out most of the day yesterday, I got home in the evening to a very needy dog. I could hear him whining through the door before I even opened it. He had heard the garage door open and was waiting noisily inside the house for me to open the door from the garage into the house.

Max’s needs are simple, and he’s not shy about letting me know when he needs a walk, food, water, or to go out at night. I don’t think he struggles with suppressed or hidden needs that he’s not aware of. When he feels a need, he just tells me.

Sometimes, once I have walked Max, fed him, put out clean water, and made sure he has access to the backyard so he can do his business, he still comes over to me (often as I’m trying to answer emails or get other work done) and whines. If I don’t respond to the whining, he likes to paw at my leg to ensure I know he wants my attention. And I think, “I have met all your needs! What could you possibly want?” and then, of course, I remember: not all of our needs are physical. Max needs love. In this case, love means scratches behind the ears and me telling him he is a good boy.

This is true for us, of course, too. Not the needing scratches behind the ears part, but that we need acceptance and love, and other needs that extend beyond the physical.

Recognizing our own needs can be difficult. Maybe not as often with the physical stuff; I think we generally know when we are tired or hungry (although we may trick ourselves into thinking we can operate in these conditions better than we actually do). And sometimes we ignore or confuse our physical needs, like when we convince ourselves we need a cup of coffee to keep going, when what we *really* need is to get some sleep.

Many Types of Needs

But again, recognizing physical needs is generally not the challenge. It's the variety of those other types of needs that can be harder to distinguish and make sense of. Emotional needs, social needs, spiritual needs, and even theological needs are often not as easily recognizable as physical needs. Unlike physical hunger, where you can fix it by grabbing a sandwich, satisfying a spiritual hunger is generally not so simple.

This is where the support of a beloved community like this one comes in.

While we're capable of meeting some of our needs on our own, many of the non-physical needs we have are better met with the help of others; through relationships in communities of supportive people.

In fact, this is one of the primary purposes of belonging to a beloved community: to help others meet their needs and to find help in meeting yours. We are called, both, to be a helper, and to be helped.

Emotional Needs

In a community this size, the emotional needs are many; but being a community of this size also means that we have a great capacity to meet those needs.

Since launching the Pastoral Care Team back in February, it has been truly amazing to watch the folks on this team reach out and offer support and respond to the requests and needs sent in by email, or filled out on a prayer card.

And what I've observed is that a huge part of what the care team does is show up. This might mean a home or hospital visit while we recover from an injury or illness. It might mean a phone call to check in if we've heard you're going through a difficult time. And in these cases, where the needs are more emotional than physical, the caring presence of a care team member can provide a lot of comfort and well-being when we're in a vulnerable place.

And while the care team members do this in an official capacity, the rest of us who belong to this community, and participate in it, can do this informally with one another to some degree.

Showing up, being present, and actively listening goes a long way. In coffee hour, this can be the difference between “Hey how’s it goin’?” without really meaning it, and “How are you doing?” and then actually waiting for and encouraging an honest response. This is the power of being present and actively listening. It can happen in covenant groups, committee meetings, and potlucks. And more than any response we might offer, more than any advice we could give, our healing power lies in the caring act of active listening.

In his book *A Hidden Wholeness*, Quaker educator Parker Palmer wrote: “When you speak to me about your deepest questions, you do not want to be fixed or saved: you want to be seen and heard, to have your truth acknowledged and honored. If your problem is soul-deep, your soul alone knows what you need to do about it, and my presumptuous advice will only drive your soul back into the woods. So the best service I can render when you speak to me about such a struggle is to hold you faithfully in a space where you can listen to your inner teacher. Most of us, so carefully schooled in our need to be actively helpful to people, are very surprised to discover the healing power of this kind of listening.”

Parker points out to us here that, ultimately, we will generally solve our own problems with our own solutions. It’s not the coming up with solutions that we look to others for; it’s the compassion they can offer us that serves as a reminder that we should be compassionate with ourselves. It’s a reminder of our inherent worth and dignity. When we remember to affirm ourselves, we can have the confidence to decide how to address our own circumstances, or as Palmer puts it, we can listen to our own inner teacher. And this is the gift we give when we listen deeply and with compassion to others.

Obstacles to Receiving Help

Now, many of us here are happy to help others when *they* need it. But generally, we are not so quick to ask for or accept help for ourselves. There can be a number of reasons for this:

1) The first is that we don't trust that anyone can do what we need as well as we can do it for ourselves. How does that old saying go? "If you want something done right..."

[let them finish, "you've got to do it yourself"]

We've got to change this. It is to our detriment that we retain the belief that we can do it all on our own. This puts us in a state of need faster and more often, and it makes us unable to help when others need us. We cannot continue to operate by ignoring our interdependence.

2) The second obstacle to receiving help is that we may not *recognize* our needs.

This, I think, is one way to distinguish wants from needs. Generally a want is intentional, even if it is subconscious. Or more simply, we know what we want, or have at least an awareness or attunement to our desires at some level.

A need, however, may not even register with us. The fact that we need it does not mean that we can always recognize it.

Sometimes, the consequences of an unmet need are so small that we absorb them almost entirely without notice. But the bigger the consequences, the more likely we are to notice the need if it continues to go unmet. It's also the case that repeatedly ignoring and absorbing the small consequences of small, unmet needs can take its toll over time, building and building until the need can no longer be ignored.

So the better we know ourselves, the better we become at recognizing our needs- and the better we can be about meeting them. This knowing ourselves can be done through a variety of methods, including spiritual practice and centering exercises, and other such things that you might explore in the context of a beloved community.

3) A third barrier to accepting help is apathy. Especially for those who serve in a "helping profession" like nurses, doctors, social workers, counselors, and therapists, there is a risk of being affected by something called Compassion Fatigue.

Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue sets in when, through the course of helping so many people, a helper begins to feel overwhelmed by the immensity of needs, and that their efforts will not ever be enough to fix the problem. So in addition to the work itself being exhausting, the sense of being helpless and ineffective can lead to apathy.

I think this poem called Compassion Fatigue by Laurie Van der Hart sums up what it feels like to suffer from it:

*It means we get tired of caring
Because there's too much suffering
We block out other people's pain
And seal off our hearts safely*

*Of course, a person can only take
So much, and do so much,
But when it's me in need of empathy
How will I cope with apathy?*

She closes with a good question, and here's another: When she says "We block out other people's pain/ And seal off our hearts safely"

What is the cost of the safety we get by sealing off our hearts? The cost is, we become apathetic, and we can't afford it.

We cannot afford to not care.

When I hear the word apathy, a line from a Mumford and Sons song comes to mind: "If only I had an enemy bigger than my apathy, I could have won."¹

Now, I have found it impossible to love and "not care" at the same time. So an apathetic heart means a world with less-love, and we just can't have that. This is a hurting world that needs our love.

"If only I had an enemy bigger than my apathy, I could have won."

So let's win.

¹ Mumford and Sons. "I Gave You All." *Sigh No More*, Island Records and Glassnote Records.

Let's overcome our apathy by taking on the enemies of racism, sexism, poverty, militarism, and ableism.

Let's overcome our apathetic hearts by responding to the world with love; or, as we Unitarian Universalists are fond of saying, Let's love the hell out of the world.

But we can't love the hell out of the world until we can love ourselves.

And so, we have to be able to recognize and respond to our own needs, especially those of us who are accustomed to caring for others, so that apathy does not begin to creep in and take hold of our hearts.

The Sufis use the metaphor of polishing our hearts. By living, our hearts become tarnished, and by loving, they become polished.

From our reading today by Mark Nepo, he explains, "that through our love, we reflect the heart of everything... There is no arrival in this process. The goal isn't to stay clean or get dirty, but to stay engaged in the unending transformative cycle of life."²

Perhaps it is that our work is never done; that we are never in a perfect state of *being always the helper, and never the helped*; Of always assisting and never needing.

No; instead, we are called to always be polishing our hearts; to reflect the love of the world; and to keep our hearts from succumbing to apathy.

If we can accept this, then maybe we can also accept that we're going to need a little help along the way.

May we not be afraid to ask for it.

May it be so.

² Nepo, Mark. "Polishing the Heart." Huffington Post, 2014. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/mark-nepo/polishing-the-heart_b_5786734.html