

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Please, Just Sit With Me”**

**Matthew 26: 36 – 46
Job 2: 11 – 13**

April 3, 2016

Back in 1993, at the conclusion of the World Series between the Toronto Blue Jays and the Philadelphia Phillies, a very profound scene was played out in the dead-silent locker room of the losing squad from Philadelphia. Phillies relief pitcher Mitch Williams was sitting in front of his locker... as the victorious Blue Jays celebrated with Champaign and TV interviews over in the home-team clubhouse. Williams, who, at the time, was one of the premier relief pitchers in the National League, had just blown a one-run lead in the bottom of the ninth inning... and now the Series was over, Toronto having won it four games to two.

As a relief pitcher, it had been Mitch Williams’ job to hold that one-run lead... nail down a Phillie victory... and force a seventh game the following night. Instead, Williams came in... pitched horribly... and eventually gave up the game winning home run to Toronto’s Joe Carter. So, while the Blue Jays and their fans rejoiced wildly at their team’s good fortune... we see Mitch Williams sitting in front of his locker... head in his hands... eyes red... a look of utter despair etched upon his face. It’s the kind of scene we see often in the “thrill of victory... agony of defeat” world of athletic competition.

But what really struck me about this particular scene was the fact that Mitch Williams was *not* sitting in front of that locker by himself! He was not *alone!* Because, flanking him on either side were two of his Phillie teammates... each of whom shared the same sorrowful expression as Williams. And these teammates sat with him in complete silence, because there was nothing that they could say to ease his disappointment... there were no words available to make his pain go away... there was nothing they could do to alter the outcome of that game.

But there they were, by his side... just the same. And they shared the pain of that agonizing moment with their friend. And by their mere presence in that humiliating and humbling hour, they proclaimed to their friend, “*Mitch, we’re with you, man! Mitch, we care about you! And we’re not going to let you bear the burden of this defeat... alone!*” And so they sat... and they shared that heartbreaking moment... together.

I want us to understand this morning that, to sit in silence with someone who is hurting, is one of the most important and powerful acts of ministry which we will ever do, as Christian disciples. I want us to understand that, even when we don’t know what to say... even if there’s nothing we can do... even when we have no brilliant solutions to offer... when we’re willing to simply “be with” someone who is suffering, we communicate something far more important than anything we could say with our words or do with our hands.

For, when we're "present" with someone in the name of Christ, what we're saying is: "*You have not been forgotten! God has not forsaken you! Even in the midst of all your pain, you are not alone!*" And it's *that* message, more than anything else, which very often makes all the difference to someone who's going through a difficult situation.

The power and importance of this kind of ministry of presence are beautifully demonstrated in our lesson this morning from the book of Job. Job had been an extremely blessed and prosperous man. He had great wealth... he had great possessions... he had a great family who loved him, and who he loved. Job had a great relationship with God, which he valued above everything else. If anyone ever had everything all together... Job was surely that guy. But then one day, tragedy strikes. In the twinkling of an eye, a series of disasters causes Job to lose first, all his wealth... and then, all his possessions... and then, finally, his ten children, who are all killed when the home in which they were staying collapsed on top of them.

It was an unspeakable, unbearable, unbelievable tragedy. And then, to make matters even worse, Job is afflicted with painful sores which covered every inch of his body... causing him to live every waking hour in physical agony, to match his psychological and emotional pain. To put things mildly, Job's life had been turned into a living hell... right before his eyes.

The destruction wreaked several years ago by Superstorm Sandy, remind us of the kind of thing that happened to our friend Job. In the course of an afternoon, hundreds of homes, and everything in them, were reduced to piles of kindling... as the storm surge overran whole neighborhoods. In the morning you had a bunch of humble dwelling, filled with priceless treasures of memories made over a lifetime... and in the evening you had, nothing! The house and all its contents... gone. Just like that.

Well, that theme had become the story of Job's life. He had gone from the penthouse to the pit, and every hope the man had ever had, lay smoking in the ashes in which he now sat. And it was as Job was in this state of complete and utter despair that three of his friends came to call on him... in order, as our text tells us, to offer sympathy and comfort. And when they saw the magnitude of their comrade's distress, what did Job's friends do?

Well, amazingly... they didn't do anything! In fact, they didn't even say a word! Not a peep. Instead, our text tells us that they sat with Job in total silence... not for a minute, not for an hour, not for an afternoon, but for seven full days! *Seven days!* Try visiting someone in the hospital, and see if you can go seven *minutes* without giving in to the urge to speak! Try going seven *seconds!* It's hard to do, isn't it?

For us, our tendency is to want to be busy... we want to *do* something. We want to cheer the person up, or rearrange the room, or find some solution to the problem. We absolutely hate it when all we can do is to simply sit quietly in the presence of a friend or loved one who's suffering. Yet, that's just what Job's friends did. They didn't have the power to make Job's problems go away... they couldn't bring his children back to life, or restore his livestock, or heal his body. There really wasn't a bloody thing that they could *do*.

So, they didn't try to cheer Job up... they didn't try to tell him that it wasn't as bad as it seemed, that, hey, things really could be a lot worse... they didn't try to offer any advice. All they did was just... plain... sit "with him." And as much as they could, they made his pain their own. He cried... they cried. He suffered... they suffered. He was in mourning... they tore their clothes and sprinkled their heads with the dust of anguish with him.

And you see, in acting this way, in all of their profound *silence*... what they were really saying to their friend was, "*Job, we love you. Job, you aren't alone. Job, no matter what happens to you, you are not forsaken, by God or by us... and you will not be forgotten. We... are with you! And by our presence, we remind you that God is with you, too.*"

You know, as Christian disciples, we need to realize the importance and the power of just sitting with those who suffer. We need to understand that, very often, there isn't much that we can "do" to help a person who's hurting. Oh, there may be various odd jobs and running around and bringing in some meals that we can do to help someone out, and that's all fine and good. But, by and large, we can't do much to take away the truly deep pain. There are few explanations we can offer which will magically cause everything to make sense and be all right.

When a loved one dies, we don't have the power to bring that person back to life... and which of us has the definitive answer that oft-asked question, "Why?" When a boyfriend or girlfriend gives us the heave-ho, we can't make them want to go out with us again. When a marriage goes bad, we can't force people to fall in love with each other again. When we grow older, there's no "fountain of youth" which we can offer to make a person young again.

In spite of our powerful need to fix things and make everything "okay," the truth is that very often we're going to come up against suffering that resists solutions and satisfying answers. But we must never forget that our ability to minister to those who are afflicted doesn't depend on our ability to solve all the problems and answer all the questions! We may not be able to solve anything... but we can still be there.

We can still sit in silence... we can still shed a tear of sympathy and compassion... we can still hold a hand in love... and we can testify by these seemingly mundane acts that our love, and the love of Christ, will not be done away with by the presence of heartache and suffering. We can testify that that person will *not* face their tragedy alone... and that his or her pain hasn't escaped the notice of the God who loves them, and the Christian community that cares for them.

And, you see, we can survive the pain, if we know that we've not been forgotten. We can bear the burden, if we know we don't bear it alone. We can handle the not understanding why something has happened, if we know that our God hasn't forsaken us in the midst of it.

That's all that Jesus was after, when He went to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane in the hours before His crucifixion. He wasn't asking the disciples to solve His problem or take away His suffering. In fact, when Peter had earlier tried to do that very thing, Jesus rebuked him and said, "Get behind me, Satan!"

No, Jesus just wanted His friends to sit and watch and pray with Him... so that He wouldn't be alone, so that He could share just a little of His pain with someone else. The disciples, as we know, were famously not up to the task. But we *can* be... when we find ourselves in similar situations of care and comfort. All we have to do is stay awake... stay alert... and *be there*, like the friends and comrades of Job.

As we leave this church this morning, and return to our life in the working world... and when we're called upon to care for someone who's walking a journey through some dark valley, just remember this:

If you can't think of a thing to say... you haven't failed "Ministry 101." If you can't think of a thing to do... you haven't let anyone down. If you don't think you can make a big difference, simply by just being there... you need to remember the story of Job, and his three friends who cared enough just to sit there with him.

That's what we all need most of all, every once in awhile... just someone to sit with us, and care. May we have the courage to do just that... and in so doing, to share the love of Christ with those who need it most. That's our call, as Christians... that's our life, as disciples! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!