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Just Breathe: Asking For Help

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Years ago, when I was still going to gym and lifting weights, I had one of those days when I just felt particularly strong. So, I decided to see if I could set a personal best on the bench press. I racked the weight, took a few deep breaths, told myself that I could do it, and lifted the barbell. I brought it down to my chest and to my amazement, I was able to press it back up. I felt so good that I did it again. Feeling confident, I went for a third time, but this time when I got the bar about 4 inches off my chest my upper body said, "I think we've had enough." I lowered the bar to chest again and waited a few moments, hoping that I could muster the strength to get the weight back on the rack, but now I couldn't even get it off my chest.

In that moment I realized that I had three options. I could ask for help. Or I could let the weight fall to one side in the hopes that I could crawl out from under it. Or I could just die there because I couldn't breathe. I thought about those three choices for a moment, and just when I made the decision to drop the weight sideways some gigantic teenager who obviously had a love-affair with steroids came over and with a smirk that irritates me to this day asked, "Can I give you a hand?" He lifted the bar off my chest with annoying ease and said he'd be glad to spot me for my next set. I mumbled my thanks and took the long walk of shame back to the locker room. I look back on that experience now and I can't help but wonder – with so many people willing and able to help all around me in that moment, why did I even consider trying to deal with that weight all by myself? Hold onto that question for a moment.

We're in a worship series entitled "Just Breathe". We've been talking about our tendency to allow busyness to consume us, and our struggle to create enough margin in our lives. To use a metaphor, many of us are running so hard we're just plain out of breath. And so, we're exploring what it means to just breathe. Last week Pastor Paul talked about the importance of creating healthy boundaries that protect our well-being. Today, I want to talk about the importance of asking for help.

To get into that topic let's turn to today's Scripture reading from Exodus. But before I read it, let me set the stage. Moses had reluctantly answered God's call to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land. While Moses was adept at herding sheep, leading thousands of people through the wilderness was more than he bargained for. As one author put it, it was easier getting the Israelites out of slavery than it was getting slavery out of the Israelites. They were so used to being slaves that they needed someone to tell them what to do and settle every disagreement. And it was wearing Moses out. But all of that changed when Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, came to visit. Let's listen to the story from Exodus 18 verses 13-26,

The next day, Moses took his seat to hear the people's disputes against each other. They waited before him from morning till evening. When Moses' father-in-law saw all that Moses was doing for the people, he asked, "What are you really accomplishing here? Why are you trying to do all this alone while everyone stands around you from morning till evening?"

Moses replied, "Because the people come to me to get a ruling from God. When a dispute arises, they come to me, and I am the one who settles the case between the quarreling parties. I inform the people of God's decrees and give them His instructions."

"This is not good!" Moses' father-in-law exclaimed. "You're going to wear yourself out—and the people, too. This job is too heavy a burden for you to handle all by yourself."

Now listen to me, and let me give you a word of advice, and may God be with you. You should continue to be the people's representative before God, bringing their disputes to Him. Teach them God's decrees and give them His instructions. Show them how to conduct their lives. But select from all the people some capable, honest men who fear God and hate bribes. Appoint them as leaders over groups of one thousand, one hundred, fifty, and ten. They should always be available to solve the people's common disputes, but have them bring the major cases to you. Let the leaders decide the smaller matters themselves. They will help you carry the load, making the task easier for you.

If you follow this advice, and if God commands you to do so, then you will be able to endure the pressures, and all these people will go home in peace."

Moses listened to his father-in-law's advice and followed his suggestions. He chose capable men from all over Israel and appointed them as leaders over the people. He put them in charge of groups of one thousand, one hundred, fifty, and ten. These men were always available to solve the people's common disputes. They brought the major cases to Moses, but they took care of the smaller matters themselves.

This is the word of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.

Why did Moses think he had to carry the weight of that work all by himself? Why did I hesitate to ask for help getting that weight off my chest? Why do so many of us choose exhaustion over sharing the load? I asked a bunch of people why they find it hard to ask for help, and have reflected on my own hesitation, and I heard three fears mentioned over and over again.

A fear of appearing weak. Our pride gets in our way. We hate feeling needy. There can be a level of shame that we experience when we can't do something ourselves. The thought of asking for help can leave us feeling vulnerable. That was certainly true for me in the gym that day that I couldn't get the weight off my chest.

A fear of rejection. Sometimes we fail to ask for help because we're afraid that if we do the other person will say no. And that "no" can leave us feeling rejected, uncared for and unloved. Many of us would rather suffer exhaustion than risk rejection.

And finally, a fear of losing our independence. Independence is such a high value in American society. We are a fiercely independent people. Asking for help requires surrendering a certain amount of control to someone else, and that can be a really frightening prospect for some people.

I'm sure that there are many other reasons that we find it hard to ask for help, but those are the ones I heard most often, and I've wrestled with all three of them. Can you relate to any of them? Or perhaps all of them?

I have no idea which ones held Moses prisoner to the hamster wheel of doing it all by himself. What I do know is that everything changed for the better when he asked for the help that he needed. And while things don't always work out quite as perfectly as they did for Moses when we ask for help, in my experience they do indeed work better when we ask for the help that we need.

And Moses isn't the only one who asked for help in the biblical story. King David, St. Paul and even Jesus - each one depended upon a whole company of women and men to bear the burdens they carried. Perhaps because they knew what we so often forget - that we were not created to do life on our own. We were created for community and for interdependence. I love what Paul says in his letter to the Galatians, "Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ."

Let me give you two simple reasons to ask for help. First, because we all need it! That's the reality of life. Who do we think we're kidding when we pretend that we can handle every situation in life on our own? We all know that life can be hard. It can be overwhelming. Some days it feels like this:



If that woman asked for help no one would think to themselves, "I can't believe that she just can't handle that on her own. What is wrong with her?" And no one would think any differently if you were the one carrying the burden. It doesn't matter whether the load you're carrying is emotional, relational, physical, or spiritual. If you carry a heavy load for too long, you run out of breath. We need others to come alongside us so that we catch our breath, otherwise we wind up like Moses...worn down and worn out.

But since we're Lutheran and we live in the upper Midwest, I need to say this. If you want help, if you know you need help, and you are able to ask for help...ask for it. Don't assume that people can read your mind. Don't assume that people know you want or need help. Don't assume that it's obvious to everyone, and then get crabby when they don't offer. Ask for what you need.

Now, I know that there are circumstances like deep grief and depression that make it impossible to ask for what you need. I'm not talking about those circumstances. I'm talking about the garden variety form of passive-aggressive behavior that some of us have mastered as an art form. You know who you are! If you need help and you want help, ask for it because we're all human. Life can be hard. And we all need a little breathing room.

But here's the second reason – when we fail to ask for help, we deny others the opportunity to serve. Several years ago, I got to serve on a panel for the National Kidney Foundation. As a kidney donor I got to speak to a group of individuals with chronic kidney disease, people who needed a kidney transplant. And that meant that these individuals needed to ask for help. And not just any help. They needed to ask people to donate a kidney. You think it's hard to ask a neighbor for a ride to the airport, or to pick something up at the store for you when you're sick? Imagine having to ask someone for a body part? Some of them, I think, would rather die than ask. Literally. What do you tell people in that circumstance?

Here's what I told them. If no one had given me the opportunity to be a donor, I wouldn't have experienced one of the most meaningful events in my life. Hardly a day goes by that I don't think about what a privilege it was to make that kind of difference in someone's life. If you ask, most people will say no. But don't rob that one person of such a great opportunity. For some of us, serving is our love language!

And I think that's true no matter the size of the ask. When we don't give people an opportunity to help us, we deny them the opportunity to use their gifts, to experience the joy of making a difference. Let me put that a different way. We cannot truly be the body of Christ, in all its beautiful fullness, if we

don't allow every part of the body to use their unique gifts.

So, how are you? Busy? Weighed down? You're not alone. It can be hard to find a moment to breathe. But that's why it's so important to create more margin in life, more breathing room - not only by sharing our burdens with Jesus and determining better boundaries, but by asking for the help you need and being the help that someone else needs. That's how we're called to live as the body of Christ. No burden is too great when many hands lift it. I learned that in the gym some years ago! So, if you need a hand, ask. And if you're asked to lend a hand, do. And then we'll all have enough time, enough margin, enough room to just breath.

Let's pray –

O God our help in ages past and in this present moment, we thank you for walking with us through the challenges of this life, bearing our burdens and refreshing our minds, bodies and spirits. We're grateful for the opportunities You provide to serve the needs of others, but we confess that we often find it difficult to ask for help. Convict us of our foolish pride and calm our fears. Remove any barrier that stands in the way of asking for help when we need it, that we might breathe deeply of Your love expressed through the gift of community. Teach us to live into the full reality of what it means that we are the one body of Christ. It is in the strong name of Christ that we pray and together all God's people said, "Amen".