

One Monday afternoon last May I returned to my office opened my email and found this:

Dear Pastor Dean,

“I don’t know if you remember me or not, but last October you conducted a funeral for my father and I was wondering if you had any free time coming up in the next few days to possibly sit down and just talk.

In the last few months I have been having a tough time with everything and it’s been hard for me to talk to my mom like I normally do because I know she is going through the same stuff and I don’t want to bring my problems upon her, on top of everything she has been going through. I also am going through a life change away from drinking and smoking pot (which I have realized that I was using a crutch to distance myself from my feelings both good and bad) and also going through probation which has been tough because I have been trying to hide everything as far as the drugs and alcohol goes.

I have never seen what I was doing as a problem and stopping doing it all hasn’t been hard, I’m just looking for a spiritual guide to talk with and to make sure that I can stay clean so I don’t make any more issues on my life as far as legally goes.

I have thought of going to the grief groups but I’m not a group person (been doing the AA stuff, more because my probation officers asked me to and I just don’t get what I’m looking in the personal side.)

You were my youth Pastor and a person that I feel comfortable with, so I thought I would reach out and see if this is something that you do and would have free time to help me with.

Please get back to me when you have a minute. You can call or email me. I will be free most of today and tomorrow, will be busy Wednesday but that should be the only day.

Thank you for your time, I look forward to hearing from you.”

He and I met for months after – sometimes weekly – and worked our way into a devotional book but what he really needed was connection, community, someone to talk too about his deep sadness, his uncertain future and a spiritual aliveness that he was seeking. With great joy I was able to connect him to our young adult softball team and a young adult small group where in community his sadness was met with joy, his uncertain future was met with acceptance and his seeking spiritual aliveness was met with others who are on the journey too.

I was in a coffee shop a few weeks back meeting with a woman who had come to worship here at Prince of Peace. She heard the invitation to the 5-minute meeting and decided that it was time to make a connection. I received her connection card that very next day

and two days later was sitting across from her listening to her story. She is a single mom and had moved into the area a couple years ago with 4 children (one of them, her 4 year old, was wriggling on her lap at the time). Her 15 year old had a great experience here at POP through the affirmation of baptism ministry and she was trying to find the same for herself and her other kids. As we talked I shared with her all the various opportunities and groups she and her kids could connect into here at POP and she continued to share with me her story. But it wasn’t until the end of our conversation that I heard her real need. She was going to have surgery this fall and she felt all alone. She had friends but she felt alone. She felt that no one would care for her, that no one would even visit her. With great joy I was able to share with her that, that’s what we do. We visit people; we surround people with love and community. As she began to cry I was able to tell her about a great group of wonderful women here at Prince of Peace that would be welcoming and supportive and be that deeper spiritual community that she needed. I saw her wriggly 4 year daughter at VBS a few weeks later year and after meeting her only that once, she came up to me and said, “Hey, you’re my mom’s friend aren’t you?” Yes.

These are two stories of how the church works, how a community gathered in the name of Jesus can organize itself in order meet the real needs of people. But here is the reality. There are far more stories out there of people who are in great need who do not send that email or who do not come back to the 5 minute meeting. And the reasons are varied. For some they’re ashamed that they have a need at all. They are supposed to handle their business. It’s those others; you know the lazy ones that have needs. For so many it’s a façade. The housing crisis showed us that. For others, naming their need can make them feel weak, vulnerable, and they may feel like they are not worthy of help. Still others don’t want to be a burden and pride becomes a major barrier in naming our needs. These are all very real reasons why so many people suffer alone.

But just like a healthy family, who can be honest with each other and hold each other’s needs with tenderness and respect, our church community seeks to be healthy, holding each other’s needs with tenderness and respect too. Read James 5:13-16.

James lays out for us how we can be that healthy community, in the name of Jesus meeting the very real needs of all of us. We do come together in community to sing songs when we are cheerful. That’s awesome. But the truth is that so many of us come to this community singing cheerful songs are we really are not cheerful. We are suffering. We are sick and we act cheerful because that’s what we think we have to do. It’s called the “Fake Happy Christian Syndrome”. And the symptoms are disconnection from community, a shallow spiritual life and the wrong belief that somehow God wants you to suffer. Ok, so I make the syndrome name up, but the symptoms are still the same. What God is calling us to do is be honest with ourselves and our community. So yes if you are cheerful sing, that’s healthy. But if you are sick, if you are suffering, we are a community that is waiting, expecting to, pray with and for you and that is healthy too.

But you may be wondering about all that anointing with oil business. In Jesus' time they were talking about olive oil and it was considered to have healing properties, and was considered to be a pleasant experience. However you can rest assured that if you fill out a connection card, send that email, come to the 5-minute meeting or meet with our prayer ministers, we don't have a jug of olive oil that we're going to dump all over you. The oil we'll anoint you with is a caring and listening conversation, connection to a small group of people that will hold your needs with tenderness and respect, and real physical help in the form of food, clothing and other assistance.

We are church, your needs are welcome here.