

“SEVEN WORDS THAT CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE:
III – HELP”

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Philippians 4:4-7

John 3:1-6

One of the happiest parts of being in ministry is doing weddings. It's so wonderful to be a part of one of the most special days in a bride and groom's life. It's particularly wonderful when I know the bride and groom really well. But even when I don't initially know a bride and groom well, over the course of the months of preparation I do get to know them. Because, before I officiate any wedding, a bride and groom go through premarital counseling with me.

In those sessions, we talk about a lot of things. Their love story – how they met, when they fell in love, how and when they decided to get married. We talk about the families in which they grew up and how they influenced them, we talk about their work and their leisure – we talk about tons of things.

One of the things we talk about, which initially takes them aback, is how they fight, how they argue. I always get the impression that brides and grooms are

surprised when I ask them to tell me how they resolve their differences – how they fight, how they argue.

And I can tell you what troubles me the most, what raises a red flag for me every time, is when I ask one of them, “How do you know when your partner is angry?” and they tell me they ask “What’s the matter?” and their partner snaps back, “Nothing.”

Clearly, something is wrong, but they won’t talk about what it is. Not a good thing for a healthy relationship – keeping everything inside, shutting the other person out, hiding your feelings.

Well, the same thing can be said about the use of today’s “word” of the day – help. Truth be told, it’s a word we use too infrequently. In fact, a study showed that seven out of ten people interviewed admitted that they had needed help at some point, but never asked for it.

Is that you? Do you have trouble asking for help? If so, you are not alone. The question is why? Why don't we ask for help? What keeps us from reaching out and letting others help us?

Well, there are lots of reasons. We don't want to appear weak ("I can handle this myself.") We don't want people to know how bad things are. We don't want to intrude on other's time, take them away from something they need to be doing. Or we think we can handle it ourselves, even though we can't.

Oh, there are tons of reasons why we don't ask for help. Let me tell you about one woman's struggle with it, and the moment that changed everything for her. Her name is Nora Klaver. She was on a business trip, and it was the end of a long week of endless meetings. And she was exhausted.

She goes to the airport ready to fly home and call it a week, when the announcement came that her flight was delayed due to bad weather. After enduring that delay, she and the other passengers started to board the plane. Nora rolled her heavy carry-on luggage down the aisle and stopped by her seat. When she tried to collapse the handle to put the bag in the overhead bin, the handle

jammed and wouldn't go down. She started fumbling with it – and, if you've ever been on a plane, you know, that means that a line down the aisle started backing up, everyone waiting for her to get moving.

She kept fumbling and fumbling, and the darned handle wouldn't go down, and then a man standing behind her offered to help. She remained, in her words, “stubborn as the suitcase handle!” Not even taking the time to look the man in the eye, she shook her head and told him brusquely she could do it herself. And indeed, after a few more attempts (no doubt hearing a lot of heavy sighs from her fellow passengers in the background), she finally slammed the handle down, although viciously catching her thumb in the process.

Nevertheless, she bent down now to lift the bag and put it into the overhead bin, but her muscles failed to provide the strength she needed to do it. Again, the man in the aisle offered to help. And yet again, she refused his help. “I can take care of it!”

Then, “mercifully,” she said, “this man then saved me from further embarrassment by simply taking the case from me and placing it neatly in the bin.”

She continued: “As I offered my thanks, I straightened up and finally looked him in the face. I noticed that he was smiling. In fact, his smile transformed me. At that moment, I felt connected to this gentleman – not in a romantic, stranger-on-the-plane way, but simply as one person to another. I finally understood the lesson. Asking for help not only gets my needs met but, even more important, offers me a chance to be touched by another soul.” (On-line, “Five Reasons We Don’t Ask for Help,” Diane Deregnier)

What a great lesson to learn, and what a great way to transform what we, too often, see as a burden – a call for help – into, instead, an opportunity to grow.

Let me share with you a couple of other lessons about asking for help, particularly for us as people of faith. First, we need to remember that God created us to need help. Let’s go back to the very beginning and look at the story of Adam and Eve. God created this beautiful creation and all that is in it, and then he created Adam and put him in the midst of it. There Adam had everything it seemed he needed, yet God gave him one thing more. Do you remember what it was? God gave him a helper, named Eve. Indeed, those were the words he said to Adam, “I will make a helper for you.”

You see, we weren't meant to be isolated, self-sufficient all the time. God put within us a need to ask for help, and then surrounded us with people to do just that.

Which brings me to a second lesson about asking for help – and that is that when you ask someone for help you are giving them a chance to use their God-given gifts to help you. And you are giving them a chance to be the hands of Christ for you.

I'm sure someone has asked you for help at one time or another, right? Didn't it feel good to know that you could do something for them? Didn't it feel good to know that they cared enough about you to let their guard down and ask you for help? Weren't you glad that you were able to give them what they needed?

You see, asking for help isn't selfish, it can be a gift to someone else. It can be a moment, like Nora Klaver discovered, a chance to be touched by another soul. Oh, that we would think of asking for help like that, rather than it being a burden or an embarrassment.

You know, the ability to ask for help is a sign of Christian maturity. One writer, Anne Robertson, even said this: “I would even go so far as to say that our spiritual growth will be stunted and will come to a grinding halt if we do not learn to ask for help. To think that we are always able to handle everything that comes our way without the help of someone else is a form of pride.” (On-line, “Help!”, Anne Robertson)

I think she’s right, and we need only turn to today’s Gospel lesson to see a beautiful picture of someone who had the courage to ask for help. His name is Nicodemus. Do you remember his story?

Do you remember that Nicodemus is a very learned individual, a teacher, a man well acquainted with Jewish laws and teachings, a man to whom others turned for learning and insight. He was well-regarded in his community. He was a proud, faithful man.

And yet, deep inside of him, he knew something was wrong. He knew something was missing. He knew facts, he knew laws, he knew rituals and liturgies – but still, something was wrong, and he needed help to find out what it was.

He could have just sat back on his learned heels and struggled forever not knowing. He could have worried endlessly about what people would think if they knew he struggled with uncertainty and doubt. He could have convinced himself to get over it and quit worrying. He could have, well, he could have done a thousand different things to cover up his problem, and not ask for help.

But, thanks be to God, he didn't. He got up from his home and went to talk to Jesus. Through the questions he asked, Jesus knew Nicodemus needed help. He knew too, how hard it must have been for Nicodemus to come to him, how much pressure there was for Nicodemus to look like he had no doubts and knew everything. And you know what? In my mind's eye, I picture Nicodemus and Jesus having a moment like Nora Klaver and that man on the plane did – when they looked into each other's eyes and touched each other's souls. A moment when Nicodemus relaxed and let Jesus walk him into new knowledge, new confidence, a new life. A moment when he found out what had been missing for so long.

Oh dear friends, asking for help for whatever – something big or something small – is more than just asking for help. It's saying "I'm not perfect, but I don't need to be," it's letting someone else use their God-given gifts to help you, and it's most of all, a way to show that you trust God's grace.

Indeed, asking for help can be a gift for you, a gift for others, a gift from God. It surely was for Nora Klaver, it surely was for Nicodemus, and it surely can be for you as well. Do not be afraid to ask for help. May it be so.

Amen.