

October 2016

Dear Friends in the Journey,

A few weeks ago I had the opportunity to preach at church again. Given that I preach at all of the services, it gives me a chance to see people that I may not normally run into at the mass I attend. And when anyone preaches, people tend to come up afterwards and get to talking about their lives.

Both through post-preaching conversations and just in general conversation, I can't tell you the number of conversations I have had with people lately about caregiving. So many people are taking care of someone – often in a pretty significant capacity. I heard from adult children taking care of elderly or sick parents. I heard from parents taking care of children with special needs or disabilities. I heard from friends seeing each other through serious illness. I heard from people with a regular visit to someone who is shut-in or in a nursing home or hospital. I heard about people making sacrifices for others.

These stories touch me deeply and really humble me because they rarely, if ever, get any “press” and people just do what they do with little thanks or acknowledgement. Granted, people aren't looking for that in the first place, but it strikes me how much kindness, generosity, patience, thoughtfulness and love are poured out every single day in this community and communities around this country (and the world).

We also know that caregiving has costs – physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, monetary, time. Some people need respite from all that they are doing. Some need support. Some are in over their heads and will need to turn to professional caregivers to take over the tasks. Whatever the case, we know that being there for others takes a toll.

So in these guidelines, I wanted to hold up caregivers and help us reflect on the sacrifices that we might be making for others – the ones that are seen and the many that go unseen.

Blessings,

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## **I. Fire-Starter Questions**

1. What is one sacrifice that you are making for others these days? Does anyone else know that you are doing this?
2. Who is someone who made a sacrifice for you? What impact did it have on you?

3. Do you know someone who is caring for someone else these days? What do you notice about both what they might be doing and what the costs of helping might be?

## II. Some Scripture Passages for Reflection

### Matthew 8: 14-15

*By this time they were in front of Peter's house. On entering, Jesus found Peter's mother-in-law sick in bed, burning up with fever. He touched her hand and the fever was gone. No sooner was she up on her feet than she was fixing dinner for him.*

### 1 John 4: 20 – 21

*If [you] won't love the person [you] can see, how can [you] love the God [you] can't see? The command we have from Christ is blunt: Loving God includes loving people. You've got to love both.*

### Romans 12: 1

*So here's what I want you to do...Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.*

### Hebrews 13: 16

*Make sure you don't take things for granted and go slack in working for the common good; share what you have with others. God takes particular pleasure in acts of worship—a different kind of "sacrifice"—that take place in kitchen and workplace and on the streets.*

## III. Some Questions for Reflection

1. It is very likely that Peter and his wife were caring for Peter's mother-in-law when she had become ill. What might this suggest about what the disciples assumed about caregiving?
2. What do you make of this quote from 1 John? How might this affirm some of what you may be doing these days?
3. In Romans 12, God asks us to make our everyday lives an "offering." What from your everyday life might you be offering up these days?
4. What kinds of "sacrifice" do you think Paul is referring to when he speaks about the "kitchen, workplace and streets"?

## IV. Commentary

Quite a few years ago, when I was a young preacher and a bit more convinced of the "rightness" of my perspective, I remember preaching about serving the poor and the need to be engaged in

social justice. A parishioner came up to me after mass and apologetically said that she felt guilty because she wasn't "doing more" in the world. She confessed that "all" she could do these days was to care for her ailing father every day after work and that this left her without much time and energy for anything else.

Later that night I cried when I thought about that encounter.

For so many of us, following the gospel means loving the people around us. As we're told in 1 John 4, "If [you] won't love the person [you] can see, how can [you] love the God [you] can't see?" And the people we can see are often the people right in front of us who need us.

Now, mind you, I am not saying that we do not need to concern ourselves with the poor, the outcast, the oppressed and the forgotten. And yet some of those very people are the people in our families that we make sacrifices for every day by taking care of them.

I know in the first scripture passage, we hear that Peter's mother-in-law is sick. Back in Peter's time the family structure demanded that family care for each other. They didn't have the care structures that we have today, so Peter, his wife and Jesus would be very familiar with kinship networks assuming responsibility for family members in need.

This is never an easy undertaking. Caretaking makes demands of us. We are often asked to put aside our preferences, our needs and our wants for the preferences, needs and wants of another. And, in my experience, people generally do not have preferences, needs and wants that are "convenient." We get calls in the middle of the night. We have our routines interrupted. Our workday gets cut short. Our plans are invited to change to accommodate someone else.

I think that's why someone like Paul can say in Romans that we are encouraged to offer up our everyday lives as a "sacrifice" to God. Many of us are making daily choices to be there for others and support them in their time of need. These things get woven into our days and often are not even viewed as "service" to others because these are our family members. Furthermore, this work of attending to people has almost no glitz and glamour to it. It's everyday stuff, not mission work, and so it can be downplayed or minimized in its impact and significance.

Now almost everyone that I have talked to who is doing some kind of caregiving these days says a version of the following, "I wouldn't trade it...and it tires me (and tries) me at times." There is often a dual reality that we face when caregiving – the joy of being able to give to those we love AND the costs of doing it on our lives.

I can imagine God "accepting" our offering of all the joys and tribulations as a true sacrifice. Why? Remember the story of Jesus in the synagogue when he points out the widow who puts a small coin into the coffer and says, "She gave extravagantly out of what she couldn't afford – she gave her all...(Mark 12:44)." Most of the caregivers I know are not giving out of an abundance of time and energy. They're giving out of a scarcity of time and energy – making it a gift from all that they have – and thus making it a real gift.

At this point I also have to mention, that we are people with limits. While some of us can keep on caretaking indefinitely or seem to have capacities to do this, others cannot. We must be

cautious to recognize our own limits and limitations and to respect that place in us that says, “I just can’t keep doing this!” Sometimes it takes a crisis to help us see this, but the signals are always there. It is not a sign of weakness when we turn to professional care or higher levels of care. This is a personal and sometimes necessary decision.

I have been so appreciative in the last year to see the tremendous efforts at caregiver support emerging at Spiritus. It reflects the need to be in touch with the costs of offering our lives as a living sacrifice for others in their time of need. And while we may feel spiritually right about serving another, our bodies and our hearts sometimes just need a break or a place to go and say, “This is hard!”

As I mentioned at the beginning of these reflections, I just want to hold up all of the people who are taking care of others these days. You remain such models for me of the Hebrew word *chesed* which loosely translates as a “faithful, loving kindness.” This is the kind of love that God has for us. It is a love that sees us through the hard times, and many of you are seeing people through difficult times these days.

No matter what we are doing for others these days in the “kitchen, workplace and streets,” let’s offer these up to God as one of our sacrifices and trust that God sees and is pleased by our actions.

## **V. Action Step**

One action I will take as a result of these reflections is...