

We just came off of an incredible summer of beautifully themed and coordinated services. I am about to break that streak because my sermon isn't about creation – but I have a good reason! Earlier this summer I had a very moving experience and I knew I wanted an opportunity to talk about it with all of you. A few weeks ago when I was asked to preach I felt that my opportunity had presented itself.

I had been invited to be a part of a luncheon group with senior citizens. As a part of the meeting we went around in a circle sharing how our month had been. Let me tell you, it was MUCH DIFFERENT sharing than Sunday mornings with the senior youth. Many, many heavy things were shared as almost all gathered were carrying tremendous emotional burdens. The last person to go began to share and as she did she never once stopped smiling. She would name a painful new reality of her life and then chuckle while minimizing the problem and forcing herself to name blessings in equal number to the pain. As she talked, I noticed her nose beginning to turn red and then pretty soon there were tears streaming down her cheeks. As those gathered cooed in sympathy she simply shook it off, gave a chuckle and was done.

I know that place. The place where you are breaking apart into a million pieces but forcing yourself to stay together. The impulse to shake it off, minimize, remain in control and not for an instant allow someone to pity you. It broke my heart.

When I left that day I couldn't stop thinking about what had happened. It made me think about you all, to be honest. All of us come to this place carrying something from our week and yet, with the exception of those willing to stand during sharing time, rarely do we allow ourselves to release those burdens in the company of one another. Why do we suffer in silence?

The title of this sermon is How Are You and I want to do an experiment. I'm going to ask you all a question and I want EVERYONE to answer out loud, together, ok?

- What is my name?
- What day of the week is it?
- How are you?

This was obviously an impersonal asking of "How Are You" but how often do we answer the same way we did here when asked one on one with somebody?

The phrase how are you has become a reflexive greeting, something you learn in a foreign language class on day one. There's a natural assumption that the inquirer doesn't really

wants to know the true answer, so why bother saying anything other than a “good” or “fine”?

It could be one of many things. Maybe we don't want to talk about how we really are because we think the inquirer doesn't actually want a genuine response. Maybe we fear that being honest will alter people's perceptions of us. Perhaps we are afraid to admit we have problems or even worse that we need help. Are we afraid that our situation is hopeless and we don't want others to confirm that? Or maybe it's just that by recounting our trials we will have to experience the pain all over again. Better to just keep it stuffed down deep where it can't get out and cause a scene.

One reason I believe we don't share about our trials is because we just don't feel the permission to have the emotions that we do. When I was younger I remember my Grandma constantly telling me that I should never complain because I wasn't like those starving children in other countries. I understand this impulse to create perspective and context and I'm not saying that it isn't sometimes a valid exercise. But when we tell someone who is suffering to “count their blessings” and compare their trials to someone who has it worse, we are invalidating their experience. And when your feelings are invalidated you can feel guilt, shame and a whole host of negative things that drive a wedge between you and the world around you.

If we believe in community (and I mean, come one, we have too – its in our name!), we have to at least try to be more empathetic and honest with one another. We live in the world of Facebook and other social media giants where everything is curated. I mean, for heavens sake, how obvious of a metaphor could I make right now about the number of filters you can use on Instagram photos??? Can we who grew up before the onslaught of this constant online presence be a guide to the youth who we are now raising and teach them the value of genuine human connection? Can we risk being a people who acknowledge that our lives aren't perfect? That we are maybe not as together as people may think we are?

I'm not expecting that everyone here starts spilling their guts and becoming best friends, but can we at least get to a place where we notice each other? See each other truly and subsequently let each other in? Yes, there are boundaries, yes there are limits, but can we try a little? Try not to say “How are you” unless we really want to hear the answer, and if asked, maybe we take the risk in answering authentically?

I have spent a lot of time working with youth, 15 years believe it or not, and I try to be my authentic self with them at all times. I kind of don't have a choice – kids see through people who are fake REAL quick. But even for all my boldness I don't always allow myself to be vulnerable. So here I stand, willing, yet terrified, to be open with you.

I do not have it all together. I go through dark seasons. I endure suffering. It's clinical name is depression. It's something I've dealt with periodically since I was 13 years old. When it gets really bad, I start to withdraw and I cut off communication with the "outside world." Luckily, I have some tremendous friends who know this about me, and when its been a little too long, they check in. Thank goodness for them, because I can hide it pretty well.

When I feel alone in my suffering, I like to read the book of Ecclesiastes. Maybe its because when I'm in a dark place I want honesty and Ecclesiastes is BRUTAL. These verses in chapter 5 are my absolute favorite. (read from bulletin) This verse doesn't sugarcoat anything. Sometimes, life is gonna suck, but surprise! It's normal! Roll with it! And don't let the suffering keep you from living or from finding joy in community. Eat, drink, laugh! We won't have time to "brood" alone if we are being present together.

Now it's your turn to put this into practice, and forgive me introverts, this may be painful. I want to take at least the next 5 minutes and give you a chance to ask someone how they are, and mean it. Maybe there's someone you saw come in that you want to check in on, feel free to get up and chat with them. And if you really don't want to talk, that's okay, just sit with your eyes closed and reflect on the morning. Take a chance, won't you?

Amanda Stoltzfus, September 2, 2018