

# ***Caregiver Care***

**Mark 1:29-45**

It's been said that physical strength is measured by what we can carry, but spiritual strength is known by what we can bear. It's not hard to find some truth in this observation, especially in the world of responsibility Wendy and I have become part of in the last year. That is, elder care.

When we moved Wendy's parents down to Mystic five months ago, we realized and agreed at the time it was the best thing to do for them, given their current and anticipated physical and mental limitations. In so doing, we joined a community of family caregivers that stretches across this country and around the world; one that includes nearly every generation and engages every ethnicity, age level, income, and status. Family caregiving has always been the largest voluntary commitment of time in this country and around the world.

Much of what we do for parents is not unlike what we've already done for our children. Elder care is similar to child care, except that in most cases, children are gaining independence, whereas the elderly are losing theirs. There are similarities and variations in terms of the physical and emotional tolls, as they are mirror images along the "bell curve" of life, with those responsible for the family caregiving making up much of the center.

Family caregiving isn't limited to certain ages, though, especially when physical and mental conditions can require an ongoing effort throughout the entirety of some lives. A few years ago, the CDC estimated that "more than 34 million unpaid caregivers

provide care to someone age 18 and older who is ill or has a disability.”<sup>1</sup> This estimate didn’t include spouses, who often take care of each other without considering it as “family caregiving.” That said, elder care is the primary profile. Nearly one in four households is engaged in ongoing care for an older adult, with an average annual out-of-pocket expense to them of over \$6000. “Unpaid caregivers provide an estimated 90% of the long-term care” in this country, with 83% of them being immediate family members, who juggle caregiving responsibilities with full or part-time employment, watching over the rest of their household, as well as maintaining the normal activities of life. As the *New York Times* put it: “Elder care has been a subterranean activity for a long time, unpaid and largely unmeasured and, as a consequence, often unappreciated.”<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, most caregivers realize what they do is, for the most part, a thankless task, especially when the ones they care for are unable to express gratitude directly. Most do it willfully and dutifully, keeping in mind the same would be offered to them should they need it. That said, caregivers find little time for themselves—at least time of their own choosing; many are overstressed and chronically tired. Not only can caregiving be exhausting, it can put a strain on one’s health and one’s relationships due to the strain and emotional toll it takes. According to the CDC, over half of caregivers claim their own health and welfare has been detrimentally impacted in the process of providing care because they often neglect their own needs. And if this isn’t enough, guilt plays a role too, as caregivers often feel as if they

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<sup>1</sup> All statistics and quotes come from “Family Caregiving: The Facts,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

<sup>2</sup> Paula Span, “New Numbers on Elder Care,” *The New York Times*, July 5, 2012.

should be doing more—that what they offer their loved ones is never enough.

So with all the stress and exhaustion associated with caregiving, how do people cope? How do they remain strong and sane? Each individual caregiver has their own way of managing their situation, but I found it interesting when the National Alliance of Caregiving reported a while back that the highest percentage of people (73% of the 12,000+ caregivers they surveyed) claimed they dealt with the stress by praying, even if they weren't otherwise religious. Prayer was a stand alone, time-out exercise to gather one's wits, to put things into perspective, and to hope for help and strength to manage the demands placed upon them. According to the survey, African-Americans and Hispanics were most likely to turn to prayer over their Caucasian or Asian counterparts; women were far more inclined to turn to prayer than men.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, those who were in a crisis situation with a loved one were most apt to search for spiritual help and strength through prayer.

In many ways, telling you this is like preaching to the choir. As people of faith, most of us already pray in times of stress and great need, if not at other times as well. It would seem almost second nature to us to pray when we're overwhelmed because prayer and meditation allow us to disconnect from emotionally-charged situations in order to gain perspective; our faith helps us to trust that God already knows of our anguish so we can quiet down and regain equilibrium and balance. Over the course of time, we experience the health benefits that come with this, where quieting down our restless

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<sup>3</sup> "Caregiving in the U.S.", National Alliance for Caregiving/AARP, 2004, pp. 68-69.

spirits helps to reduce blood pressure, heart rate, and muscle tension, as well as improving our sleeping habits and natural appetites. One doesn't have to be religious to benefit from meditation, but faith does lend focus to prayer. Faith is what allows us to sense that we are not alone in taking on the challenges that life throws at us.

Thomas Merton, the beloved late Catholic mystic who has been in the news recently because the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth occurred last weekend, earned his fame by introducing contemplative prayer to a wider audience beyond the walls of the monastery or convent, observed that,

...prayer, especially meditation and contemplative prayer, is not so much a way to find God as a way of resting in [God] whom we have found, who loves us, who is near to us, who comes to us to draw us to himself.<sup>4</sup>

Merton's books have helped me throughout the years, but particularly recently with our new caregiving role. One insight that I've appreciated is the recognition of how difficult it is for even people of faith to maintain perspective when their lives get crazy and uncertain. In a prayer that exposed his own vulnerability through a time of personal chaos, Merton articulated for me the emotional hardships evident in caregiving:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*.

For some reason, as each day passes, the wisdom and sincerity of that prayer becomes more meaningful and important to me. Sometimes spiritual strength comes from realizing that it's okay to feel at your wits' end or anxious and uncertain about how things will play out. It's part of being human and living in the moment sustained by God's merciful grace.

The struggle of living in the moment, coping through stress of managing someone else's welfare through many unknowns, is what wears down even the strongest of caregivers over time. We can feel spiritually depleted, even when we know we have reason to be grateful. We can press on doing what we must by duty more than with desire. But even that's okay. That's being human and recognizing our own personal needs in the process.

As any of us know, caregiving takes everything out of you; the satisfaction of being helpful doesn't always replace what's been spent in energy, so one must be careful to take care of oneself. Caregiving requires breaks, so we can fill the tank and replenish the soul. It's important at times to address your own needs before someone else's, in order to come back to the task with more to bring to it.

Perhaps for that reason, I've come to a greater appreciation to how Jesus needed to take care of himself, especially after taking care of so many others. Today's reading from Mark is one of several reported moments in the Gospels when Jesus took a time out in order to save himself. In this particular story, Jesus' retreat occurred following an intensive period of healing and delivering people from their pain. First, Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law; then he healed

others, which drew the attention of many more who were suffering, summed up in this way:

And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons...

The implication is that virtually everyone in Capernaum who was in need came to him. Mark presented it like a mass casualty emergency room of needy people seeking relief and comfort. How does one summon the energy and will to do this day in and day out without becoming completely drained and just as needy as the ones being care for?

In the story, we're told Jesus arose early in the morning while it was still dark and stole away to a deserted place, where he could be by himself to pray. I find in that action at least three things which are relevant for caregiver care.

The first is that it's clear Jesus took the initiative to get away, meaning he didn't wait for permission; he judged when he needed the rest and respite before he could carry on. What's insightful is that, by doing so, he maintained control of his own life—he didn't sacrifice his own wellbeing to respond to needs. That's critically important for a caregiver to grasp: there will always be needs that beckon you, but you must recognize the moment when you are no longer the one who can best respond. Caregivers need respite and rest in order to be able to carry on.

The second thing of note is that when Jesus took his leave, he did it at a time that was considerate of others and more convenient for those who would be seeking his help, i.e., before the day began. He did it before he went about his tasks. He didn't work and work

and work until he dropped from exhaustion and decided then it was time to rest. Instead, he was proactive—he scheduled it when it would be least disruptive and most manageable. Again, that helps to reduce stress and disorder for both the caregiver and the care-recipient.

Another helpful insight I note in this story is that when Jesus sought respite, he physically removed himself from the scene, going to a deserted place, away from distraction and the temptation to jump back into his work before he was ready. This is how he guaranteed that he would get the rest he needed. He removed himself from the setting where the needs were evident and beckoning. He created a physical distance so that he could establish a spiritual distance from that which had become too taxing. That helps to bring perspective, particularly in high-maintenance, high-dependence situations. Even Jesus couldn't be available all the time.

All three of these insights are important concerns for caregivers; all three are areas where we easily lack control and discipline which, of course, sets people up for burn out. When it comes to caregiving, there's a necessary rhythm to the art of caring that must be respected and followed in order to sustain both the spirit and the heart in this type of work. Caregivers must take care of themselves in order to have the inner resources, strength, and patience to help others over time. Without that deliberate attention to our own wellbeing, we are set up to wear ourselves out or wear out our welcome as caregivers.

We can do this with the help of others—people to help us address our own needs. It's been said that it takes a village to rear a child; the same may be true of taking care of someone for any length

of time. Caregivers are best served by building a community of helpers to provide respite and support and to do tasks that take time away from providing service. I have to believe Jesus knew that to be the case, since early on in the Gospel stories, each of his disciples soon shared the role of healer and helper, which expanded their capacity to meet human need. That's a fascinating example of community building to sustain caregiving and how, in lack of it, we soon find ourselves unable to maintain the care that we seek to offer. It's not only self-care for caregivers; it's about a communal sharing of responsibility.

With that in mind, if there is one gift that any of us can offer another, it's offering to help share the burden of one who is in a caregiving role—even if only for a short respite, or offering a listening ear, or providing help with a single task. It helps sustain a caregiver and to lift the spirit of one who may feel isolated and marginalized from the flow of life. It also makes it more likely that caregiving remains compassionate, considerate, loving and merciful to everyone involved.

The golden rule finds its place in all of this as a motivation to do this good work: to do for another what you would want done for yourself. That's the wonderful way life works; we pay forward kindnesses shown to us, and we offer love as we would want to be loved. That is the renewing source of spiritual strength for any of us. It is the also what matters most when we seek or offer caregivers care.

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