

Pray More Healing Retreat - Transcript

Standing with Suffering: The Power of Showing Up

Ashley Stevens

Hi, I'm Ashley Stevens from Mountains Unmoved, and today I'm going to talk about the power of showing up. We all have suffering family members or friends or coworkers in our lives, and I've found in my experience that one of the best ways to support them through hard seasons, one of the best ways to stand with them in their suffering, is simply by being present. So I'm excited to share more, but before I dive in let's open in prayer.

In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. God, I lift up anyone we're thinking of today. I lift up anyone suffering in their lives. Anyone walking through a hard season, whether it's a son, daughter, spouse, grandparent, coworker, friend, and I just pray that my words and my experience would give anyone listening courage to show up despite what they'll see. To show up even if they don't have the perfect words to say. And ask all this in Your name. Amen. In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I served for three years on staff with FOCUS which, if you're not familiar with FOCUS, it's the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, and it's a Catholic campus ministry. In my second year on staff I served with a great team, but they were the most musically talented people I've ever known, all of them. We had great people, great guitarists, great people on the piano, lots of beautiful voices, and each morning we would start off our day with a holy hour, and we would end each holy hour with a song. And I remember each morning my arms were always, always covered with goosebumps just as I heard how beautiful their voices sounded together as they echoed off the inside of our church walls.

That year was also the year I got engaged, and shortly after I was engaged, at a team breakfast, my fiancé and I asked that team to be our choir at our wedding. And that morning we played the song by Bethany Dillon called *Let Your Light Shine Down*, that we wanted them to play as we processed out of our wedding. And that morning, as they got excited to be our choir, we got excited to put together the perfect playlist for our big day.

And I don't know how familiar you are with my story, or if you've listened to some of the other talks at this retreat, but soon after that breakfast, soon after we were engaged, myself and four of the women on my team that year, four of the great musicians, were in a terrible car accident. And for myself, what followed was six months of fighting, fighting for my life in hospitals, fighting to get back to the

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life I knew in therapy. And for me that chapter, that chapter was lonely. It was isolating, because I had been uprooted from my house, from my job, my coworkers, from my friends, from my fiancé, from the life that I knew. And many days in therapy I just felt like I was on an island, so far away from what I had known.

And I think there's many examples of that, of people enduring great suffering and isolation and loneliness in scripture, but the one I want to focus on today is in the book of Job. And many of us are familiar with him just being the boss, right, of handling suffering, but Satan threw two loads, two different loads of suffering on him. And first he lost all of his cattle, which is his job and his food, and then he lost all of his employees and his servants, and then lost his sons and his daughters. But Satan wasn't done. In the second round of the suffering, Satan covered his body with excruciating boils. And soon after those two loads of sufferings his friends got word, and his friends, in the same way we would respond, wanted to go see him, wanted to go see if they could support him or reach out to him. And that's where I'll pick it up today, when Job's friends found out about his suffering.

In Job chapter 2, verse 11 it says: ***Now, when three of Job's friends heard of all the misfortune that had come upon him, they set out each one from his own place. They met and journeyed to give him sympathy and comfort. But when, at a distance, they lifted up their eyes and did not recognize him, they began to weep aloud. They tore their cloaks and threw dust into the air over their heads.*** Today I'm going to talk about the things that keep us from showing up, because there are many things that... many insecurities that keep us from visiting when we know it's going to be hard. In this case, what I want to talk about first is often there's a fear, especially if someone looks different, there's a fear that if we show up and they're not who they were that it will be awkward, and it will be scary, that we might cry. And sometimes that keeps us from showing up.

When I was in the hospital, my suffering was different from Job, but in a similar way I looked very different. I had a neck brace on early on in the recovery, I had breathing tubes and feeding tubes, at one point after a surgery I had a big egg carton taped to my ear and wrapped around my head. And I'm sure it was hard for friends and for my grandparents to show up and to see me walking through that, to see me looking so very unrecognizable, as it's put in the book of Job.

But I would encourage you, whatever situation you're scared of walking into, or however different that person or that situation looks, show up anyways. What spoke to me most when people showed up was not, I don't know, what they brought, but it was seeing the familiar faces, and it was seeing people that were brave enough to come visit me despite me literally being belted down to a hospital

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bed at points. And there's such power in people showing up when you're walking through incredibly hard seasons like that.

Let's go on, because I love what happened next with Job's friends. After they had wept: ***Then they sat down upon the ground with him seven days and seven nights, but none of them spoke a word. None of them spoke a word to him, for they saw how great his suffering was.*** And personally, for me, that's another thing that keeps me from showing up, that keeps me from calling or texting, because I'm scared that I don't have the right encouraging words to say. I'm scared that I don't have the perfect verse to give that person that will encourage them, or that I don't have like the proper book recommendation to give them. And sometimes it terrifies us that we're going to show up and have nothing to say.

But just as Job's friends did, and from personal experience I can tell you: there are no words needed. The power that comes from showing up is not having some rehearsed speech; the power that comes from showing up is just simply showing up. Another thing, I think, that keeps us from being present is sometimes it's not a physical possibility. I had a friend recently that had a baby, but she lives across the country. And I so badly wanted to show up, I so badly wanted to physically be there and hold her baby, and meet her baby, let her take a nap, make her a meal. But sometimes, situations in life - for me, I was at a stage of parenthood when I just couldn't fly down there to see her - sometimes we're not able to physically be there. But that doesn't mean we can't show up anyways.

When I was in the hospital, I think my favorite part of each day was when we would walk down to my mailbox, and people were just so generous, people that couldn't physically be there sending letters to encourage me, or sending care packages. I got a Huskers soccer jersey signed by all of the players, I got things people had seen in the store and thought of me. I even got a letter from my ex-boyfriend's parents just saying that they knew I would get through it. And I think, to me, that just resonates the point that it doesn't matter how many degrees of separation there are between you and the person you're thinking of today, it doesn't matter if you haven't seen them in ten years, or if you had a bad falling out. Show up anyways. Send the letter anyways, or the text. Show up in whatever way you can anyways. And it doesn't have to be some grand act to be important, just show up in whatever way you can today.

John Paul II has a quote I love that says "The Gospel is the negation of passivity in the face of suffering." I'll say it again. He says "The Gospel is the negation of passivity in the face of suffering." So I don't know what your reasons are for being passive. I don't know if it's because you fear what you'll see, you fear what you'll say, or if you fear... or you don't because you're not able to physically be there, so

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you do nothing instead. But whatever it is that's making you choose being passive, lay that down. Whatever it is that's keeping you from showing up, lay that down. Because, from personal experience, I can assure you just showing your faces is powerful. Just sending a text is powerful. Just sending a handwritten letter, encouraging whoever you're thinking of is powerful.

And I think when we do this, when we're visiting, when we visit people anyways, and when we put their needs above our insecurities, it's one of the best ways to bring Jesus to people. It's one of the best ways to say "You matter to me more than awkwardness. You matter to me more than showing up and feeling like I'd cry." So I just want to leave you with the question: Who are you called to show up for today? Who are you called to take a meal to? To get coffee with? To call and check on? Be that person. Be the brave person that lays down their fears and shows up anyways. Let me close this in prayer.

In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. God, I thank You that You've called us to be Your hands and feet, and I thank You for how You've held us through our hard times, and I just pray for a greater courage to do that for the people in our lives that need it. And I just pray that whatever it is that's keeping us from showing up, that anyone listening would hear, from experience, that they don't matter, and just give the gift of being present to those suffering in their lives. It's in Your name I pray. Amen. In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.