

Our Ultimate Caregiver

by Brad Jersak

CAREGIVERS

For a decade of what feels like another lifetime (1998-2008), I led a faith community of which one-third of our attendees were people with mental or physical disabilities in full-time care. Their struggles included Down Syndrome, autism, brain injuries, and a host of neurological conditions and disorders that confined these dear friends to wheelchairs. Their appearance, their sounds, their smells were so attention-grabbing that one might overlook the constant, active presence of their ‘caregivers.’

These caregivers were responsible for 24-7 assistance in every area of their ‘client’s’ lives, including clothing them, feeding them, administering their medications, bathing them and changing their adult diapers. They worked courageously to alleviate their suffering, protect

them from self-harm and accidents and to provide them with life-affirming experiences. These caregivers—the ones who truly saw it as their vocation—knew that care is more than a warm feeling or sense of concern in their hearts. Caregiving was a full-time job that included hands-on involvement.

During that same season of life, I also witnessed and experienced an excess of human tragedy. Yes, I could trust that God loves us in some overarching way. But the pain I saw and felt blinded me to God’s active caregiving. While others tried to assure me that God cares, what came to mind was the adage, “Your heavenly Father sees every sparrow that falls—but they still fall.” Similarly, “God sends the sunshine and the showers on the crops of both the just and the unjust—and also the tornadoes?” God’s so-called care seemed abstract to the point of offensive. God didn’t seem to care like the caregivers I knew.



GOD, DO YOU CARE?

With that backstory, I have been contemplating the story of Lazarus' death and resurrection (in John 11) from the point of view of his grieving sisters, Mary and Martha. It's too easy for us to hover above the story, racing too quickly to its powerful, happy ending. Mary and Martha had no such viewpoint. They couldn't skip through to the end. They had to live the story one gruelling movement at a time—waiting in vain for Jesus to arrive in time.

They certainly had great faith in the midst of grief and tragedy. They fully believed Jesus would show up and heal their brother. He could have done something to prevent Lazarus' death—even at a distance. No doubt about it—they knew he cared. But then he didn't arrive on time. Not even close. Didn't he care?

Sure, they knew that Jesus could raise Lazarus to life on the Last Day at the resurrection. And he will. But in this in-between time ("between the graveyard and the garden," as my friend Jason Upton sings), there is grief. Especially grief about what God has allowed. Our bewildered grief gives rise to the question, "Don't you care? You could have... but you didn't."

GOD, DON'T YOU CARE?

Has your life experience ever left you with questions? Sometimes the questions scare us. We worry that raising our doubts might offend God or be heard as a blasphemous accusation. And other times, we do use it as a rhetorical accusation as we slam

the door in God's face. "Don't you care" becomes "How dare you!"

My suggestion: don't be afraid to be gut level honest with God—our Father can handle it. But then, when you're able, have the courage to keep the conversation alive. Go ahead and ask, "God, don't you care?" then stick around for God's response.

Can you think of the particular times when God seemed to abandon you to the cruelties of life? I can. Then I close my eyes, I imagine I'm Mary or Martha, I look Jesus in the face and ask him outright. "God, do you care?" Then I remember how he responded in the story. Do you remember? Jesus wept. No clever answer, no justification, no explanation. His tears said, "Yes, I care. More than you know."

GOD, HOW HAVE YOU CARED FOR ME?

Being part of the Body of Christ means that through you, God can care for others. The divine Caregiver may extend your attention, your empathy and your hands of service in Jesus' name (even anonymously!). Those to whom we extend God's active care may begin to notice that God is not distant, absent, or silent after all. They will be able to witness and experience God's caregiving for themselves and give thanks.

We might say that as we are "the Body of Christ," God borrows our ears, eyes, mouths, hands, feet, even our wallets (!) to demonstrate his love as real-life caregiving. But rather than rushing around doing what we think Jesus might want us to do, I recommend pausing to ask, "God, how would you like to

JESUS ON OUR CAREGIVING FATHER

(from Matthew 6)

²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?"

²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

²⁸ "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?"

³¹ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

care *through* me today? Who would you like to care for? If you need to borrow my life to actively care, here I am?"

As we pause, instead of being reactive rescuers who scramble around and make matters worse, we have a moment of clarity

Jorge Cocco Santangelo, based in Dallas, TX, is our feature artist in this issue of CWRm. His online gallery is at www.jorgecocco.com

where we know in our heart who we should help and how we can care. Again, nothing dramatic here. But grace has a way of opening our eyes to the real needs and how to meet them.

I'm always happy to hear uplifting accounts of God's infinite caregiving visiting God's children through willing helpers.

I JUST KNOW WE'LL BE OKAY

I'll leave you with a simple example that illustrates God's humility as a subtle caregiver that may open our eyes to how God's care permeates our world, often as apparent coincidences with the fingerprint of love.

A friend of mine (I'll call him

Keith) had been laid off from work just as his hearing declined to the point of needing expensive hearing aids. His wife's modest income and Keith's employment insurance only covered their mortgage costs and basic living expenses, so the \$5000 charge was

far beyond their means. Anxiety was high,

and Keith's nerves were already worn thin. In desperation, they prayed together and, gratefully, they felt God's peace settle into their hearts immediately. Keith's wife said, "You need these hearing aids. Just put them on the credit card. *I just know we'll be okay.*" My friend felt it, too—the divine Caregiver settled Keith's racing mind, and he surrendered his circumstances to God's care, come what may. We might call such experiences a form of God's "internal care."

On the same day that Keith saw his ear doctor, put his hearing aids in his ears and on his card, he met three friends for dinner, two were atheists and one was "spiritual-but-not-Christian." Keith didn't

mention his situation at all—nothing about their income, bills, or the cost of the hearing aids. But at some point, during the meal, one of the atheists turned to Keith and said, "I've been thinking about you and all the good you do in our community. And I felt like I wanted to do something for you to show my appreciation."

His atheist "angel" pulled out his pen and wrote out a check on the spot for—you guessed it—exactly \$5000.

It doesn't always work that way. But on that day, that's what happened. God's care included an internal peace and an external friend—not a "miracle" or a magical money tree. But Keith trusts the truth that God not only cares, but that God is his Caregiver. Even better, when Keith reflected the story back to his atheist friend, the man wept openly. Why do you suppose that is? His tears said, "*If there's a God after all... One who would care for Keith's family so specifically through me, then maybe that same God cares for me, too!*" □

Brad Jersak is an editor at CWRm and author of the More Christlike trilogy.

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