

We've all been there; standing next to someone who has just lost a loved one. They are visibly saddened by the death of their beloved. Their pain is palpable and you want to do the right thing to bring them comfort. But what is that? What do you say? What should you say? What should you not say?

There is an appointed time for everything, and a time for every affair under the heavens. A time to give birth, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to uproot the plant. A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to tear down, and a time to build. A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance. – Ecclesiastes 3

Comforting the sorrowful is one of our spiritual works of mercy. As Ecclesiastes informs us, for every beginning there is an end, where there is life there is inevitable death. Everyone knows sorrow and everyone dreads the loss of a loved one. Especially within this Year of Mercy we should reflect on applying mercy to the sorrowful through the perspective of Christ.

Our culture abhors the idea of death, and as a result it does not know what to do in the face of it. Our faith, in contrast, gives us the hope of resurrection and celebration of a life lived in Christ's presence. In contrast to fear, we eagerly are called to hear our Savior say to us, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Come share your Master's joy." All the same, despite this joyous reception, we still miss their loss, and it is in this loss and isolation from earthly joy, that we are called to comfort.

When it comes to comforting the grieving, first think of how you yourself grieve and what gives you comfort. A genuine response is always more fitting than a throw away phrase of condolence. Because of our culture's fear of death, many of us never know how to respond to grief. We offer a "My condolences" or "Sorry for your loss," but to comfort we need to get our hands dirty and take on that suffering as Jesus did by sharing the load of grief.

Sympathy is a matter of acknowledging another's hardships and trying to comfort them. Empathy is a matter of sharing their hardship, either through experience or putting yourself in their shoes. Of these two, empathy is the greater response and more Christian response. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to be like him, especially in his suffering.

One of the most familiar parts of Mass is the Penitential Act, when we pray, "I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do."

That "what I have failed to do" clause always troubles me because, quite honestly, there's a lot that I should have done and could have done but didn't do. And I'm sure when it comes time for my personal judgement, Jesus will have a list.

I have my own list. Right at the top is something that happened several years ago, when a fellow I knew called and left me a voice message that said he "needed" to talk with me. It seemed he always needed to talk with me about something or other, and the conversations usually were nothing more than him doing the talking. They often lasted up to 45 minutes, at which point I discreetly ended the call by telling him I had something urgent to do. Our time is precious, right?

The truth of the matter, I've come to realize, is that Jesus will often put people in our path who make us uncomfortable or annoyed or even angry, but he brought them to us for a reason ... and the reason may not always be immediately apparent.

I didn't return this fellow's call. A day later, he left another voice message, and I didn't return that one either. However, just when I figured I better respond, he called again, and I picked up the phone.

He was devastated, and the first thing he said was "My wife left me and I don't know what to do. You're the only person I could talk to."

It was my turn to be devastated. My selfishness and self-centeredness were immediately apparent, and there was nowhere I could hide from my self-accusations. There was no possible justification for “what I had failed to do.”

Jesus wanted me to do something, and I dropped the ball. Correction: I hadn’t dropped the ball because I hadn’t even picked up the ball. I couldn’t excuse myself by suggesting I had something pressing that kept me from returning the call. The truth is I just didn’t want to be bothered.

I’m convinced I’ll do time in purgatory for what I failed to do, and that particular omission will be right at the top of my list.

No matter how busy we are, we’re called upon to make time for people who need us, even if they vex us.

We’re all familiar with the Corporal Works of Mercy, but not so much the Spiritual Works of Mercy. The fourth one is “Comfort the Sorrowful.” The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has this to say about comforting the sorrowful:

“Be open to listening and comforting those who are dealing with grief. Even if we aren’t sure of the right words to say, our presence can make a big difference.

“Lend a listening ear to those going through a tough time.

“Make a home-cooked meal for a friend who is facing a difficult time.

“Write a letter or send a card to someone who is suffering.

“A few moments of your day may make a lifetime of difference to someone who is going through a difficult time.”

That last sentence says it all. Those suggestions require us to take time out of our busy day for other people, and that’s not always easy. Several people I know will call me and keep talking for an hour, which makes me very nervous because I have a lot to do. I could be spending that time on projects for my classes, grading papers, answering emails or, yes, fulfilling my wife’s “To Do” list, which typically includes chores like yard work, cleaning the garage and going to the dump, however unceremonious that may be. (I never realized semi-retirement could be so demanding and time consuming.)

A chronic flaw of mine is I don’t give people who need me enough of my time because I’m always “too busy.” However, one thing is perfectly clear: When you get involved with Jesus, Jesus’ “To Do” list has to come first. Not second or third.

He’ll also make it apparent what he expects you to do. Even though I don’t always follow his promptings, he’s patient. He’s also understanding. But he’s persistent, which means to say throughout the day he puts people in my path who need a kind word, who need advice, who need a sympathetic ear or just someone to say, “It’s going to be all right.”

Look for those opportunities and take them seriously. Otherwise those words “what I have failed to do” will haunt you someday.