

Proper 23 Pentecost
Job/Mark10:17-31
October 11, 2015
reflections on faith

The Gospel lesson about the rich man reminds me of a quip attributed to Princess Diana: “they say it is better to be poor and happy than rich and miserable, but how about a compromise like moderately rich and just moody?” I like to imagine the rich man offering Jesus a compromise.

Over the last few weeks, we have preached in this congregation about big picture issues, Christ in the world. Racism, gun control, the refugee crisis, poverty. Today I invite reflection on your personal experience of the relationship between faith and suffering.

The story of Job is fiction – not historical. Even so, Job’s story touches our worst nightmares. We have experience with Job’s dilemma of innocent suffering, either in our own lives or those of someone close to us. Anyone of us could easily find our lives torn apart. Stories like Job’s cause us to wonder whether there really is a God, and if there is, whether God cares about us. In the face of extreme suffering, we question our faith.

Written somewhere between 300-900 BCE, Job is considered part of the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scripture. We read sections of Job for the month of October, but I have to say it is a book more easily absorbed when read at one sitting, as a whole. I say that because, as a hospital chaplain, I frequently encounter people who have latched onto a small out of context bit, and derived painful misunderstandings of the nature of God.

The fictional set-up for the story is the source of much of that: the wager between God and the Satan (who is part of God’s council, more like a prosecutor than the ‘evil’ opponent who later appears in Hebrew writings). Job lives righteously. God takes away Job’s ‘perfect life’ – his children, wealth, possessions, but even so, Job remains faithful to God. God and the Satan wager whether Job will curse God if his health is taken away, too. God says to the Satan, do what you want, just don’t take Job’s life. This set-up is the dramatist’s way of explaining that the terrible events that befall Job are inexplicable, the work of unseen forces, and beyond Job’s control.

For some people, this transmogrifies into ‘God won’t give me more than I can handle.’ It also suggests that God is whimsical, capricious, and that suffering is the by-product of God’s casual and uncaring relationship with humankind.

This Wisdom story is not the set-up prologue. Job’s story is about man’s relationship and commitment to God, about faith. Yes, the inexplicable nature of Job’s suffering raises many questions. The heart of the story, though, is this: When we no longer receive blessings, or they are taken away, when our life falls apart, what happens to our faith?

Job is a riches to rags, top dog to underdog story. Our national myth favors rags to riches, inner city child to billionaire stories. Our expectation is that Job will get up and get over it, find another job, maybe hire a lawyer and a therapist, and climb back to the top.

In the opening chapters, Job declares, “*Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?*” Job acknowledges that suffering happens, and faithfulness to God is no sure protection against it.

The beleaguered Job doesn’t get up and move on, he remains sitting on the ash heap – the town dump – complaining vociferously about what has happened to him. He rants at his friends who come to sit with him, and at God.

Job’s friends are not very pastoral, not so good at listening. They recite conventional theological “wisdom.” Deuteronomy 30:15-20: faithful obedience is connected to blessing, disobedience with curse. From the Book of Proverbs, retributive justice: righteousness is rewarded and sin is punished (Prov. 1:19-33). Job’s friends assume Job has done something really awful to wind up as he has. Their message is: you deserve what has happened.

I’ve heard something like that spoken by family and friends, and I’ve also heard from the hospital bed more than once ... *‘I guess I am exactly where God wants me to be.’*

The reality, I think, is more like this: God’s blessings are not always apparent, and suffering is often caused by unseen forces.

In today’s pericope, Job fears that the one thread, the one blessing, that he clings to, his relationship with God, has been severed. He cannot find God, and he is terrified.

Well, Job is not alone. We are right there with him, looking for answers. We, too, are terrified by our seeming powerlessness to prevent, or change, outcomes, and by innocent suffering. When the answer we seek is not forthcoming, we feel like God is not listening to our prayers. I’ve certainly been there, haven’t you?

Even as he loudly berates God for hiding from him, Job continues to seek God. Why?

Job wants to address God directly, to put God on trial. Job wants to lay his case out, persuade God of his own merit. Job is totally secure in his belief in God’s essential goodness, so secure in his commitment to God that he is willing to argue with God – he does not fear God’s response.

I wonder, do we need to think of God as judge? How does that help us? Well, for starters, that assumes that life is fair according to *our* terms. If God is judge-like, then we could use our human logic to persuade God of our goodness, our righteousness. We could lay out our lifetime

of good works – and God would judge us fairly by our merits.

Well, it doesn't work like that for Job, or for us. Our relationship to God is not merit-based, it's based on grace and love. Next week we will hear God's answer to Job. For today, let us reflect on holding tenaciously to faith in God's goodness, and to hope.

Jesus has something to say about equating wealth and success with God's favor: in a society where there are essentially two classes – the rich and the poor – the rich have become rich at the expense of the poor. Intentionally or not, the rich benefit from the suffering of those who do without. There is no other way to look at the wide disparity between haves and have nots.

That is true even if a particular rich person is blameless, has conducted himself with righteousness and in accordance with the law. Even if the person is someone like the young man who approaches Jesus and asks what he must do to have eternal life.

There is a familiar pride in this man who says he has kept all of the laws. He sounds a bit like Job, doesn't he? Even with his righteous perfection under the law and his blessings of wealth, this man seeks God. Something is missing in his life.

Jesus '*looking at him, loved him.*' What a beautiful phrase at the heart of the story. Jesus speaks to him with love, not judgment.

Jesus says, to find what you are lacking, "*You must sell what you own and give the money to the poor... then come and follow me.*"

The man '*went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*'

'Possessed' and 'possessions' have the same root word, and can mean both 'ownership of' and 'controlled by.' What possesses us may be material goods, it may be family, it may be pursuit of status or ambition. Jesus tells the man to give up those things which he places ahead of his relationship with God.

I long assumed that the man kept his possessions, and was deeply saddened by what he could not attain. But the Scripture doesn't say that. Perhaps the man did exactly what Jesus asked – give away that which possessed him – and follow Jesus. I like to think his grief was temporary, and that joy and freedom became his new life as he followed Jesus.

At first, the disciples are shocked by Jesus' answer, and then they scramble to take credit for what they gave up. They still don't get it, do they? Jesus patiently explains. How many times, and in how many ways, does Jesus have to say it (*again* as the Gospel text records it) – to enter the kingdom, you must come as little children, discarding the status of family, or wealth, or power, without your possessions. Come as the lowliest, the poorest, the least. Those seekers who give up what possesses them, what stands in the way of their relationship with God, will find the kingdom.

Jesus words are full of promise and reassurance about leaving those relationships or things which possess us.

“There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news who will not receive a hundredfold now...and in the age to come eternal life.”

You will be abundantly provided for in the kingdom, which is both now and not yet.

What are you struggling to let go of? This seems to me particularly relevant to those who have received a call to the ministry support circle, or to any new ministry. Think of Peter and his brother Andrew who left their nets – their father undoubtedly assumed they would take over the business he had built. Family expectation. For Peter and his brother it was not an “either /or” question, it was a ‘both/and’’. They maintained their relationships, as they visited home again and again, and they were not impoverished by leaving their nets and livelihood.

Be assured, Jesus says, that your leave taking, your setting aside, is not about loss, it is about gaining the Kingdom. “For my sake, and for the sake of the good news” is both/and, not either/or.

Still, we are left with our age-old questions about suffering. It seems our real-life experience does not always match our theology of a loving God.

Or does it? Jesus experienced human suffering, he tasted death. When he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane before the crucifixion, Jesus asked God to ‘take this cup’ from him. From the cross he borrowed from today’s Psalm, ‘my God why have you forsaken me.’ God knows our suffering; God sent God’s son to share our lives. God is with us unconditionally, for better or for worse.

Our relationship with God is grace-filled.

When we question God, when we hold up our suffering, our difficulties, our struggles, to God, it is an expression of our faith in God’s goodness.

Amen.

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