

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22) – Year B – October 7, 2009 - Homily
Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Psalm 26; Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16
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What is fair and right? Do we always get what we deserve? Is justice so blind that she frequently pins the tail on the wrong donkey? Why do we even believe in God, when the world is so apparently full of injustice and especially when bad things happen to good people? Making sense of suffering is not easy. Living in the gap, as the Education For Ministry program describes it, is uncomfortable for most of us, not least because it leaves us feeling out of control. According to one 2008 study out of UCLA, reactions to fairness are "wired" into the brain. In other words, "Fairness is activating the same part of the brain that responds to food in rats... [and] this is consistent with the notion that being treated fairly satisfies a basic need". The study implies that we have some kind of innate sense of fairness. In spiritual terms, it may work both ways. Our experience of fairness meets a basic need and is comforting – God's goodness and justice is clearer. On the other hand, when the unexpected or downright unfair hits us, then we are left with questions, doubts, and challenges to our faith in God.

This week is like the perfect storm of big questions in our lectionary readings. We glanced at marriage and divorce on Sunday. Tonight we are going to look at the Book of Job. At the center of the story is Job, a righteous man who, unbeknownst to him, becomes the subject of testing in a heavenly challenge posed by the adversary, and approved by God. What the reading misses out is that when the testing begins Job is happily married with ten children, in good health, and enjoying all the blessings of an abundance of wealth. Prior to this reading, the adversary has been given permission to destroy Job's livestock and children, leaving just his wife. In this portion of Job, his health is taken from him. Actually, his skin is so blistered and sore from head to foot that the affliction is more akin to being flayed alive. According to Torah, Job has one of the many skin conditions classed as leprosy, and is therefore an official outcast from his community. Job is sitting on an ash heap scratching his skin with a broken piece of pottery. In reality, he is basically at the town dump, with all the other outcasts and garbage. In the eyes of the world, he has now been reduced to a man with poor health, no wealth, and to nothing better than trash. His wife tells him to "curse God and die" and distances herself from him.

If Job has become nothing in the eyes of the world, how do we think Job might look in God's eyes and vice versa? The Book of Deuteronomy and the Book of Proverbs provide a black and white, retributive view of life and justice. They tell us that righteousness is rewarded by blessings from God, and sinfulness is punished by curses from God. Then we read the Book of Job, which challenges everything we think we know about God's blessings and God's justice. Job also challenges the basis of faith. Do we believe in God simply to get some reward or benefit? Or like Job, do we maintain our faith in God despite our worldly circumstances, and if we do, what then is the basis of our faith? There truly is a lot to think about here and no easy answers.

The dialogue mostly takes place in the heavenly courts, where the heavenly beings present themselves before God. One of these beings is *the satan*, or adversary. This is not the devil of modern-day understanding, whose work is evidently to undermine God and God's purposes in the world. This is a heavenly being under God's command. As we already know, this is the second time that the adversary has come before God concerning Job, who remains the subject of the ongoing discussion about integrity and faithfulness. God points out that Job is still faithful. The accuser replies that the testing has not gone far enough. It is only when our own flesh is threatened that we will surely turn against God. God gives the adversary permission to inflict

physical ailments on Job, but to spare his life. Clearly, Job's wife has had enough. She too is suffering terribly in this ordeal. Her children are dead. Her livelihood is destroyed. Now, the final indignity, her husband is a leprous outcast. Perhaps now, in the extremity of her grief and anger, she cannot stand to watch her husband go through a prolonged illness before he too dies. Not one of us goes through life without facing some kind of loss. And when we do, we must all wrestle with our faith as we try to make sense of life through incredible emotional or physical agony and a whirlwind of other feelings. When it comes to God, at each of these stress points, when we reach our personal DEFCON 1, we have two choices: we can turn **to** God, or we can turn **away** from God.

You and I are familiar with the consequences of a sin-filled world. The confluence of our own sins, and the sins of others usually has unpleasant consequences and can radically affect our lives. When we accept our creaturely limitations and our sinfulness, we are less likely to blame others for our misfortunes, or to rely on others for our happiness. Yet it still leaves us with the question of God's role in the whole mess of life, and our response. The attitude of our heart is the key to our reflection. If our basic worldview is a scheme of rewards and punishments, then what happens when we get seriously ill for no apparent reason, or when a dear friend is killed in a car wreck, for example? The entire basis of our faith is a crumbling ruin, because it is built on a foundation of self, especially our sense of control, and our ability to save ourselves by good deeds and hard work. That type of thinking is essentially a framework of entitlement.

At the other end of the spectrum, if we accept the fact that our moment-by-moment existence is by God's grace and mercy, and that there is nothing we can ever do to earn our salvation or to save ourselves, all our faith, trust and hope rests in God. It is the same as saying, "God does not owe me anything," or instead of demanding "why me?" to contemplate the question, "why not me?" In this scheme of life, humility and service to others are the norm. In good times and bad, we realize our need to turn back to God and repent of our sins. In deep gratitude for all God's gifts, we offer God our worship and praise through all circumstances. We act more like Job, holding fast to God in faith, knowing that God is in control, and that only God will redeem all things.

Job is presented as a human being, with a wife, children, and all the challenges of juggling a full home life and a busy work life. His suffering appears to be entirely unfair, and even God acknowledges his righteousness. The Eastern Orthodox liturgy describes Job as "the sufferer, [and] the Old Testament icon of Christ. [Whereby] this reading announces the great mystery of Christ's sufferings, obedience and sacrifice." Here is one of life's certainties: whether we profess the faith of Christ crucified or not, we will all suffer in this world. The difference for Christians is that we have more than self to lean on. Instead of imploding, we reach out to God and community for help. When we hand over our sorrow and anger to God in prayer, and share our distress within the loving arms of our community, we find our freedom in Christ. Freedom to hear and receive the gift of hope, and to find meaning in our pain. Freedom to discern how God is constantly working to redeem our suffering. In the loving embrace of the community of faith, you and I are strengthened and comforted in the knowledge and experience of Christ's abiding presence and steadfast love, God's unending compassion and mercy for all who turn to Him in faith.

Amen.