

True Faith

10-6-24

(Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Mark 10:2-10) Rev. James Koyama

Ministers are often tempted to skip over readings that make them uncomfortable and that will probably make people in the congregation uncomfortable.

I am a divorced man who remarried. And as much as I would once have liked to imagine myself as an unproblematic person or prided myself in being a guru on how people should get along, passages like our Gospel reading force me to see what I would rather not see.

It doesn't matter how much of the blame I think I can shift away from myself, or that the consequences of divorce may have been different in the time when Jesus spoke; the passage still reminds me that my own "hard heartedness" contributed to the break up. And that recognition makes it harder for me to be the one to "throw the first stone" when others also fail.

In one way or another Jesus holds up an unflattering mirror to us all. He makes us look at what we don't want to see, and in doing so, he does us a great service. So I didn't want to skip over the Gospel reading without some comment.

Suffering

But, what I want to address today is the reading from Job, a book about long suffering. It strikes me as humorous in a dark sort of way, that a passage on marriage and on suffering should be paired on the schedule of readings (pause). I do believe that every marriage creates some suffering, some create a lot of it. But I think I can say with confidence today that it can also be the source of the greatest happiness.

What I want to address is redemptive suffering of the physical kind. And I'd like to share some thoughts on it based, on my experience with a good friend who passed away a year ago. I know he would not mind my sharing.

His name was Jim. He was a member of the church in Heath and he used to drive up there on Sunday morning's in a car with a specially designed driver seat and a walker in the back. He needed these contraptions because he had a lot of trouble walking. Every Sunday, he would arrive early enough to practice with the choir. He would groan as got out of his car and then he would begin inching his way up the wheelchair ramp to the sanctuary. Whenever he got up or sat down, he would say "Oh God!"

Jim was a very human fellow. His wife had passed away years before, so he was living alone and you could tell he was lonely. The elderly church ladies found him somewhat annoying, because he was a little too cheeky for their liking. But they tolerated him anyway. He loved to tell lame jokes and always brought Cheeto's as his contribution to church potlucks, all part of what made him seem like an unserious person.

He talked a blue streak and sometimes when I thought he was talking about nothing, it would suddenly occur to me that he was saying something important. He was an honest person and I came to respect that beneath the surface he had formed a solid religious foundation that was old-fashioned in a good way. He also had an encyclopedic knowledge of old hymns.

What most impressed me about Jim, was his commitment to being cheerful. Because at the time, he was living with a considerable amount of pain. And in spite of the pain, he forced himself to get up and go out to musical events and to church. We all marveled at what a tough cookie he was, going here and there, always moving an inch at a time. Jim didn't want to dwell on his pain. Instead he wanted to enjoy life; eating (he loved to eat), telling stories, worshipping and singing and sharing whatever he could.

The pandemic wasn't kind to Jim and near the end of it, he was going to a shop for something he needed and someone knocked him over in the doorway. And that was the last time he walked. He spent the last year and a half of his life in bed.

One time when I went to see him, I had to stand outside the room while they were changing his bandages. I could hear him moaning and crying out for mercy as they rolled him over. The sound was so pitiful and it struck horror in my heart.

Finally, the nurse came out and told me I could go in. And right away he put the best face on it that he could manage and after dismissing my concern, we went on to talk about several things other than his suffering.

And the reason I am telling you this is because I'm realizing that there is a profoundly meaningful gift that a person can make to others, through the way they deal with their own physical pain and suffering; especially in the way Jim dealt with it; in the way he sought not to lay his pain on other people.

Jim passed away a year ago or so, but he is still a part of my life and, as I limp around with this minor hip arthritis, I am thinking a lot now about the example he set for me, maybe without even realizing it.

And through these experiences with Jim and with others, I'm starting to see the world more clearly in a way I never saw it before. Where before, all I could see was people refusing to take up their crosses, now I see how many people are enduring the cross of their own physical suffering with grace, and that is no small thing. And I want to say to them, "I see you."

I believe that the struggle to handle this kind of pain and suffering with grace is so profound that anyone who has never suffered in such a way should never pretend to understand or be the judge. And I believe that the decision to meet our own suffering with grace must be a matter of personal choice; an act of free will, faith and courage and that the attitude of those of us without that pain should be one of respect.

That is what I saw in Jim. I saw how he courageously dealt with his pain. I saw how, even when there was no longer any hope of earthly relief and no longer hope of an earthly future, he clung to every possible shred of optimism. In the end he was sometimes angry and sharp

tongued, but the decent and faithful person he was, was never overcome.”

When I was much younger, I thought that I should be impressed by people who are doing well; who are rich and prosperous and healthy; who have everything going their way. And I thought that they were the ones I should emulate. But the truth is, those people never impressed me. I only found them intimidating.

I’m far more impressed by people who are courageously facing the challenge of aging gracefully. In them I am seeing ever more fully the upside-down beauty of the Gospel, where true beauty and grace are won in our response to suffering. And I know that I will be inspired in my own bodily decline by the beauty I saw in a very ordinary old man who struggled with his, as we all someday must.

Talk a bit about Job.

You probably noticed that the Book of Job was written to address this kind of suffering. It faces head-on the reality that in a world full of

blessings, we all come to a place where, regardless of how well-behaved or pious we are, we eventually face the reality of suffering and losing all we have; where we are left with nothing to cling to but our faith. And Job further asks the question whether it is worth it to continue being faithful or take the easier path; to “curse God and die.”

As the story goes, God meets with the accuser, (which in other bibles is translated as Satan). The accuser argues that Job is only being good because it serves his self-interest. He goes on to say that, if everything God has given him is taken away, Job will turn against God. So, the two make a wager. God wagers that Job will never turn away and Satan wagers that he will.

Everything is taken from Job including his livelihood, his health and his family. He is left scratching his painful sores. Even his friends believe that he must have done something bad to have deserved this fate, which, in fact, he does not deserve. And yet Job refuses to “curse God and die.”

I think that in many ways this story about Job’s faith in the goodness of God is the example we find in all those who suffer ultimate loss and

continue to trust and seek God and live in his grace. It is his challenge and ours.

But I also entertain the hope that our own suffering and our witness to the suffering of others can become something that matures and deepens us, the way a peach might become ripe and golden before it is harvested. Or maybe, I am being too poetic because the suffering we are talking about can be as cruel and terrible as open hands being nailed to a cross with iron nails. That's what Jim's cries for mercy in the hospital sounded like.

Maybe a better way to say it then is to say that, "his light shone in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." Through his own suffering and death, Jim took up his cross, followed Jesus and entered into the realm of eternal life. And in doing so, he joined the body of saints who have showed us the way through death that leads to life; for that is our faith. And what is equally important is that by his witness, he gave people like me and those who will follow, the strength to face our own time of trial. Just as many among us are doing now; if we have eyes to see.