

Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Reverend Dr. Daris Bultena

October 11, 2009

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Job 23:1-9, 16-17

¹Then Job answered: ²"Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. ³Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! ⁴I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. ⁵I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me. ⁶Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me. ⁷There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.

⁸"If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; ⁹on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.

¹⁶God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; ¹⁷If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!

Mark 10:17-31

¹⁷As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" ¹⁸Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'" ²⁰He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." ²¹Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" ²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." ²⁶They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible."

²⁸Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." ²⁹Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, 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, ³⁰who will not receive a hundredfold

now in this age — houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions — and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

"Beyond the Props"

Mark tells it this way: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

The man has come to Jesus. And he falls before him and has asked him what he has to do in order to "inherit eternal life." Jesus calls his attention to the commandments. The man indicates that he has kept these commandments. Clearly he knows within himself that there is something more. He has some clarity about the reality that he has to be missing something.

Something in him enables him to both see and feel that while he has done some great things and attended carefully to the law he still has not attained that greater good, that prize, that which is beyond what he has currently experienced. He senses it. He can tell that this "eternal life" is bigger than his experience and he wants to be a part of that. He is inquiring from deep within his longings. So, his question to Jesus is authentic.

That authenticity is acknowledged in the response of Jesus that looking at him he loved him. This is not like those encounters with ones who test him or give him a pop quiz. This man is real; he is a seeker. He wants this "eternal life." He wants to know how to attain it, how get it, how to make it part of his reality.

It is an interesting use of words, for only here does Mark use those words "eternal life." Other than this passage in verses 17 and 30, those

words do not appear anywhere else in Mark. They are all over the Gospel of John, but they are not typical Markan language. Jesus frames his response to the man's desire for eternal life in terms of go, come, and follow. "Go sell all that you have, come, and follow me." Such is the pathway to eternal life.

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Anne Bradstreet, the first American poet, came to America in 1630. When her home in Andover, MA burned she wrote a poem entitled, "Upon the Burning of Our House-July 10th, 1666." Her poem was written about her home that had been burned. In the poem she describes looking at the ruins of her house and remembering where a trunk sat or where a chest sat. She recollects where she sat.

She goes on to recall that all her fine things are now ashes and never again under that roof will she receive guests. Never again will there be ones who can come and eat at that table or gather around the candle's light telling stories or old.

She chides herself for taking comfort in things and questions her attachment to things. Her Puritan roots are clear. She confesses that she was too attached to those things and goes on to associate her loss of those things as necessary for her to focus on what she really should focus—the life and place in heaven where she has a home framed by "that mighty Architect."

Her view is that she too much loved her wealth and worldly goods and now those things have been taken away in order to get her focused on where she needs to focus. Those things—that house, that money, that place she sat, and that chest where she stored her things were impediments to her being fully the person she was to be.

And now re-framed her view is looking not at the things of this age, but at those of the age to come. There is a difference between this world and the next. There is a difference between the love of things here and now and that which is to come. She sees all of that in the burning of her house.

There is a sense in which she willfully and almost with gratitude looks at the charred remains. Surely there is some sadness there, but also there appears to be some near delight that this has taken place. It serves for her as a mid-course correction to the way she has been living. It is clear that this has changed her. She is a different person because of the fire. The fire causes her to remember who she really was to be.

Her reaction is different from that of the man who comes before Jesus. Both of them have to do with possessions. He walks away and Mark tells us that he goes away “grieving, for he had many possessions.”

Oh possessions. Aunt Annie Hougan when she came to America brought all her possessions in grey trunk that sits in my mother’s kitchen. Aunt Annie’s truck is the size of one of those plastic storage totes, and yet it contained all her worldly goods.

We are far more like the man in the gospel lesson than we are like Aunt Annie. We have “many possessions.”

Our relationship with things is a curious one. I have many things. I enjoy my things. Some of those things I have carried with me for years. I cannot imagine how many pounds of things I have.

My story is not unusual. I know you have things too. I have watched you these days as people tote things in for the Fall Festival. Our rejects

could outfit many a needy people. Some of it is just reject, but some of it is good stuff too.

Our relationship with things is a curious one. Our many possessions become the props in life that somehow give us a sense of home and a sense of security and a sense of place. It is like when one goes on a vacation. That vacation may be great fun and just a joyous time, but there is something about coming home and sitting there in your favorite chair. Ah...to be there. It is, as Martha Stewart says, “a good thing.”

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Job is still sitting in the ash heap. Job hardly has the experience of the Psalmist in the 139th. “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. ... Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.”

The experience of Job seems the antithesis of that of the Psalmist. Job is in the ash heap. “Today my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. ... If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him.”

For Job, all of the props have been removed. All those creature comforts are gone. He is afflicted. The props—those things that literally propped him up. Those buoys that kept everything afloat—they are gone. Job is suffering. Job will not accept this suffering.

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You see, that is real deal here. Job is beyond the props. Everything that anchored his world is gone. Everything that made sense has been stripped away. It is all vanished and gone. And he is in the dark.

It is like that book “Night”—you remember that work by Ellie Wiesel, the Jewish writer who spent his life trying to come to grips with the Holocaust that he experienced firsthand as a boy in the Nazi concentration camps. In the book—in the night—in the darkness Wiesel ends up questioning the very existence of God. How can God be real when all that was happening was happening?

It is Job. There he is on the ash heap. He is in the dark. It is a hell there, and he is having no luck producing God. He is in the dark. There is something about the darkness. In the darkness—where no one can see there is a freedom to be just about anybody and to do just about anything. Job can, there in that darkness, call God out, and even though God does not appear—Job can, as his wife urged him, “curse God and die.”

And yet...even in that darkness...even when all the props are gone...there is this profound religious faith of Job which dares to ask the ultimate questions confident that in his asking he is not turning away from God really turning towards him.

It is the movement of Anne Bradstreet—there in her own heap of ashes. Does she “curse God and die?” No. All the props have been pulled out. There is no house. There is no table. There is no place to sit and regale the stories of old. It is burned up. She is in the dark—and there she sees beyond. She inquires, she reaches, she moves her focus beyond.

How is it in the darkness of that day in Gethsemane that Jesus could know? How could he know that there would be something beyond the darkness?

Calvin, that great theologian of the Reformed Tradition, doubted the existence of God daily. Not only did he say he doubted the existence of God, but he also gave thanks for that doubt. He said that in the face of that doubt there was nothing to do but cling to God in faith.

It is that darkness—and there is that choice to make in the darkness. When all the props are gone, when you are on the ash heap, what happens there? There is faith. That deep abiding trust in the trustworthiness of God.

How could he have know that day in Gethsemane and then on Golgotha? I don't know that he could have know—but he dared to go into the night, into the darkness, and into the place beyond the props where there was nothing but faith.

Jesus looked on that man and loved him. He loved him enough to invite him to see the reign of God as beyond all the accumulation of his life. He loved him enough that he wanted him to comprehend his existence beyond the limitations of this world.

See, I think the stuff (oh do we have issues with the stuff and that includes money)...I think the stuff kept him from being able to step into

the future orientation that is the kingdom of God. That stepping forward involved a “go sell, come and follow.” That was too much.

He could not relinquish control. He could not relinquish control enough or long enough in order to step into the place of identification with Jesus. He could not relinquish enough in order to step into the new reality that is the reign of God. He may have followed the rules and commandments well, but he just could not get beyond the props in order to trust in the trustworthiness of God.

I wonder—who are we? Are we the man? Are we Anne Bradstreet? Are we Aunt Annie? Are we Ellie Wiesel? Are we Job? Are we Calvin? I wonder? I wonder if we are beyond the props. Who are you? Amen.