

Testing
St. Paul's UCC Church
October 3, 2021

Friends in Christ....

Our Old Testament lesson today introduces us to Job and the tests that he must endure. The Gospel lesson comes from the 10th Chapter of Mark where Jesus is tested about his opinion on divorce and then he welcomes the children to come to him.

There is some debate whether or not Job was a real person or if it is a parable that would have been used by Rabbis for religious instruction about the nature of God. The book is an essay on the age-old question of theodicy, which is “Why does a good God let bad things happened to good people?” The conversations that take place around this question fills most of this book until God comes on the scene less to give an answer to that question and more to confound the inquirers as to let the conversation end on a note of wonder, mystery, and awe.

Job is presented as a righteous person who stayed faithful to the Lord even in the face of many tragedies. Even his wife was not supportive. It is easy to forget that the tragedies would have affected her just as they did him. In the CEB, it is the Adversary who does the testing. Adversary is a translation of the Hebrew word of *ha-satan* that also shows up as the Accuser or Satan. Job 1:1 is perhaps the most important verse in this long book, because it declares Job's complete innocence. From **Job 1:1, 2:1-10** (CEB)

Job's piety and life of bliss

1 A man in the land of Uz was named Job. That man was honest, a person of absolute integrity; he feared God and avoided evil.

Job 2:1-10

Job's Adversary refuses to give up

2 One day the divine beings came to present themselves before the LORD. The Adversary also came among them to present himself before the LORD. ²The LORD said to the Adversary, “Where have you come from?”

The Adversary answered the LORD, “From wandering throughout the earth.”

³The LORD said to the Adversary, “Have you thought about my servant Job, for there is no one like him on earth, a man who is honest, who is of absolute integrity, who reveres God and avoids evil? He still holds on to his integrity, even though you incited me to ruin him for no reason.”

⁴The Adversary responded to the LORD, “Skin for skin—people will give up everything they have in exchange for their lives. ⁵But stretch out your hand and strike his bones and flesh. Then he will definitely curse you to your face.”

⁶The LORD answered the Adversary, “There he is—within your power; only preserve his life.”

The test intensifies

⁷ The Adversary departed from the LORD's presence and struck Job with severe sores from the sole of his foot to the top of his head. ⁸ Job took a piece of broken pottery to scratch himself and sat down on a mound of ashes. ⁹ Job's wife said to him, "Are you still clinging to your integrity? Curse God, and die."

¹⁰ Job said to her, "You're talking like a foolish woman. Will we receive good from God but not also receive bad?" In all this, Job didn't sin with his lips.

We have to wonder why God allows the Adversary to do his dirty work. Is it an on-going practice? The first two chapters are not pleasant reading. It would have been one thing to lose everything in a stock market crash, but after our text for today, he lost all ten of his children, his animals died, and his employees were slaughtered is something else.

Scott Hoezee of the Center for Excellence in Preaching responds to this by writing: "Of course, whatever we make of the *cause* behind the disasters that befell Job, what we cannot deny or forget is that something very like the scenario sketched here does happen all the time on this planet. Parents do lose children—sometimes all of them at once. Disaster and disease come to people who are as lovely and precious of folks as you could hope to meet. And such chaos is pretty indiscriminate, too. Hurricanes, tsunamis, and earthquakes do not generally flatten the houses of mafia types and drug kingpins while leaving churches, synagogues, mosques, and the domiciles of the faithful standing. Pandemic flu outbreaks like COVID-19 don't target the really greasy people who work for a given company while leaving untouched the kind and gentle souls on the payroll. Disaster and disease come to all when they strike."

We are told in Job 2:10 that in and through it all, Job did not sin. What that tells us is that it is no sin to stand up for the way things are supposed to be. It is no sin to look God square in the face and say, "No sir, you cannot make me believe that this is right, that this is what you want, that this is what you had in mind in the beginning."

Perhaps the answer is that we do not have complete understanding of God and His will, but a very minute one. He gave us free choice, and we make both good and bad decisions. Our bodies are far from perfect. Sometimes the rules of nature conflict with our wishes and desires. No, I do not believe that God specifically punishes us. Rather it is our choices that have consequences. Perhaps we are not much different than Job.

When we turn to the Gospels, we read time and time again that Jesus was tested by his opponents. He was always getting what they hoped were trick (or gotchya) questions that his answer would turn supporters away from him. But he was always one step ahead of them. Such is the case in today's text in a question about divorce. It was a very different culture when Jesus walked the earth. John Pilch, an expert in the ancient Mediterranean world, wrote: "marriages were between families. Each family selected a partner, union with whom was intended to bind

the families together, forming a stronger unit. Even such a brief statement of the nature of Mediterranean marriages makes it evident why divorce would be unacceptable. Divorce is not just the separation of two partners but rather the separation of two families.” We turn now to the 10th chapter of Mark:

Mark 10:2-16 (CEB)

² Some Pharisees came and, trying to test him, they asked, “Does the Law allow a man to divorce his wife?”

³ Jesus answered, “What did Moses command you?”

⁴ They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a divorce certificate and to divorce his wife.”

⁵ Jesus said to them, “He wrote this commandment for you because of your unyielding hearts. ⁶ At the beginning of creation, *God made them male and female.* ⁷ *Because of this, a man should leave his father and mother and be joined together with his wife,* ⁸ *and the two will be one flesh.* So they are no longer two but one flesh. ⁹ Therefore, humans must not pull apart what God has put together.”

¹⁰ Inside the house, the disciples asked him again about this. ¹¹ He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; ¹² and if a wife divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

Jesus blesses children

¹³ People were bringing children to Jesus so that he would bless them. But the disciples scolded them. ¹⁴ When Jesus saw this, he grew angry and said to them, “Allow the children to come to me. Do not forbid them, because God’s kingdom belongs to people like these children. ¹⁵ I assure you that whoever doesn’t welcome God’s kingdom like a child will never enter it.” ¹⁶ Then he hugged the children and blessed them.

May God bless our hearing of his holy word? Amen.

“Is it OK to smoke while you are praying?” a man once asked a wise old abbot. “Oh no,” the abbot replied. “Prayer must be the whole focus of one’s mind.” Later another person came up to the abbot and asked “Can a person pray while smoking?” to which the abbot immediately replied, “Of course! You can pray at any time!”

Sometimes the answer you get depends on how you ask the question!

The Pharisees had confronted Jesus with a trick question. The purpose is likely that they can catch Jesus on the horns of a rabbinic dilemma regarding divorce. The Law of Moses allowed for divorce if a husband found something “objectionable” in his wife. (Deut. 24: 1-4) Those who followed the Rabbi Hillel school of thought interpreted this to mean that a man could divorce his wife for practically any reason. All she had to do was to do something that displeased her husband, even as slight as burning the toast for breakfast. On the other hand, those who from the school of Rabbi Shammai held to a stricter interpretation, that adultery was the only ground for divorce.

Jesus avoids the trap by going back to the book of Genesis and looks back at God's purpose for marriage in the beginning, then quotes these words: ⁶At the beginning of creation, *God made them male and female.* ⁷*Because of this, a man should leave his father and mother and be joined together with his wife,* ⁸*and the two will be one flesh.*

Taken all by itself and out of context, Jesus' words about divorce and re-marriage in Mark 10 are troubling. They are troubling because they seem devoid of the grace Jesus usually exuded. Jesus' grace shined the brightest, in fact, when he was faced precisely with people caught in adultery, with a woman married five times and now living with another man, with prostitutes and tax collectors and . . . well, you get the picture.

As we read this text, we need to be reminded of what question was he responding? Well, it wasn't some earnest question of "Lord, is there grace sufficient for one such as I?" Jesus was not responding to a hurting person. Instead he was responding to people who over the years had become experts at splitting some of the finer hairs of the Law of God. He was responding to people who were trying to trip him up, to trap him in one or another interpretation of the Law, either of which could land Jesus in hot water. In short, he was talking to people who treated the Law not like the divine gift Jesus views the Law to be but to people who treated the Law like a poker chip or a football—the whole thing to them had become a kind of sick game.

In a perfect world, there would be no need for divorce. Yet we know that there are abusive situations that a partner needs to get away from. We know that there are people who are not true to their marriage vows. We know that there are troubled relationships for a variety of reasons. Just read the advice columnists like Dear Abbey, Dear Ann, Dear Amy and the others, and one gets a glimpse into that world of broken relationships. If they can be mended, that is great. But if not, then decisions need to be made about one's future.

As Christians, we can look at the cross and be reminded of God's grace. He forgives us for our sins. As no one is perfect, we need that grace to live our lives to the fullest. Amen.