

Church of the Crossroads
Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 22, 2006
Neal MacPherson

WHEN WE HAVE IT ALL TOGETHER

Job Chapter 26
Psalm 22:1-15
Mark 10:17-31

When I first read the scripture readings for today, I thought that I would have to choose to preach either from Job or from the Gospel of Mark. The thought never entered my mind that a sermon could be preached on both of these passages, until the Lectionary Study Group took a closer look at the texts. It was two weeks ago and there were only two of us- Mary Reese and myself. It was a holiday and the office was closed. Perhaps the other members of the study group thought that we would not be meeting.

As Mary and I read the texts, it became clear that comparisons could be made between Job in the 23rd Chapter of Job and the rich man in the 10th chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Job, at one time a rich man, becomes poor and destitute because of the disasters that befall him. The rich man in Mark's Gospel is a wealthy man, most likely a landowner, who is offered the opportunity to become poor but refuses to do so. Both of these men claim that they have kept all of God's commandments for a very long time. Says Job,

*“My foot has held fast to God's steps;
I have kept God's way and have not turned aside.
I have not departed from the commandment of God's lips;
I have treasured in my bosom the words of God's mouth.
- Job 23:11, 12*

As for the rich man of the Gospel story, after Jesus recites 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,” he replies, “Teacher, I have kept all these from my youth.”

We might say that both Job and the rich man claim to be righteous human beings. They believe that their righteousness will be rewarded in this

life. Job imagines the occasion in which he could bring his complaint directly to God.

*“I would lay my case before God,
and fill my mouth with arguments.
I would learn what God would answer me,
and understand what God would say to me.
Would God contend with me in the greatness
of God’s own power?
No, but God would give heed to me.
There an upright person could reason with him,
and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.
- Job 23:4-7*

The rich man in Mark’s Gospel, who claims that he has kept all the commandments, wants to receive the reward of eternal life.

Both Job and the rich man, however, fail to receive what they seek. Poor Job cannot even approach God directly because God is hidden from him.

*“If I go forward, God is not there;
or backward, I cannot perceive God;
on the left God hides, and I cannot behold God;
I turn to the right, but I cannot see God.
- Job 23:8, 9*

As for the rich man, Jesus asks him to sell what he owns and give the money to the poor, and then become a follower, but the rich man cannot bring himself to do what Jesus asks, and goes away grieving, for he has many possessions.

We might say that both Job and the rich man believe that they are righteous human beings, that they have it all together. Hence the title of this sermon, “When We Have It All Together.”

The truth is that none of us ever have it all together, really. Any righteousness we claim is a partial righteousness at best. We might say that the very fact that we claim to be righteous is in itself a sin. Spiritually speaking, faithfully speaking, no one ever has it all together. I am reminded of those wonderful words of William Sloane Coffin, who once said that

when we make a virtue out of being virtuous we are like giraffes, “lofty up front but dragging a bit in the behind.”

I am also reminded of that British comedy team that went by the name *Beyond the Fringe* before they metamorphosed into *Monty Python’s Flying Circus*. In one of *Beyond the Fringe’s* routines, the preacher in the course of an outrageous and nonsensical sermon, reflects, “Life is like a can of sardines; there’s always a little piece in the corner you can’t get at.”

Spiritually and faithfully speaking, which is another way of saying humanly speaking, “there’s always a little piece in the corner we can’t get at.” We can never claim to have it all together. We can never really claim to be righteous.

Christianity would have turned out to be a far more authentic religion if its adherents could have realized this from the beginning. We can never claim to “have it” as Billy Graham claimed when he spoke a number of years ago at Union Theological Seminary. In a sermon at the seminary chapel, he held the Bible in his hand, waved it above his head, and declared, “I’ve got it; it’s right here; I’ve got it.” This happened when he was a much younger Billy Graham than he is now, so perhaps his outburst can be excused. But none of us “have it,” none of us can possess the Christian faith, as if it were a thing to be had in the first place, not even Billy Graham.

Job had to learn the hard way that he did not have it all together. He had to come to terms with God’s hiddenness, in other words, God’s mystery. There is something about God that we human beings cannot control. There is something about God that we cannot fully understand. That is just the way it is. God is God. We are human. Job was only fooling himself when he viewed himself as a righteous, virtuous man who deserved a suffering-free life and a direct access to God.

The rich man also was fooling himself. Ched Myers points out that he may have lied when he claimed that he had obeyed all those commandments from his youth. Notice that Jesus added a commandment not found among the Ten Commandments. It was “do not defraud.” Myers says that, given the social and economic context of 1st century Palestine, no one who was as rich as this man was could have been so if he had not defrauded others.

It’s interesting how we American Christians have domesticated this story to suit us. In popular Christian thinking, the rich man has become the “rich young ruler.” And as for that saying about the camel going through the

eye of the needle, we have explained that away by saying that according to the famous medieval assertion, the “eye of the needle” referred to a certain small gate in ancient Jerusalem through which camels could enter on their knees. So we have attempted to soften the saying. The preacher Frederick Beuchner has tried to restore the saying to its proper impact. He said that when Jesus talked about it being harder for a rich man to get into the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, it would be like saying that for wealthy North Americans it is harder to enter the kingdom “than for Nelson Rockefeller to get through the night deposit slot of the First National Bank.” (*Telling the Truth*, p. 63) A reminder: in relationship to the vast majority of the world’s people, most of us are rich, and our wealth has come at the expense of the suffering of others. That is just the way it is.

It’s simply impossible for us humans to achieve any kind of eternal life on our own. We human beings, humanly speaking, spiritually speaking, simply cannot get it all together. That’s the bad news. But there is, nonetheless, good news, and the good news is the news of God’s grace. “With human beings it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.” Grace is there to save us.

Given the relative comfort of our lives, perhaps the harder question for us has to do with how much we are willing to give up for the Gospel. Just because we cannot achieve any lasting righteousness, there is no reason not to pursue righteousness as long as we do not make a virtue out of it, as long as we know that we will never get it all together. The pursuit of righteousness may well bring persecutions of one kind or another. That is what Jesus told his disciples at the close of the story. That’s to be expected. We will not always be rewarded, or even appreciated for following Jesus. But in the end, we trust that God’s grace will be there to see us through, and that is good news enough. That, my brothers and sisters, is good news enough.

Back to Job and the rich man. They are there in the scriptures to make us just a little uncomfortable. They are there to teach us. May we take the lessons of their lives to heart this day and always. Amen.