

Servant Leadership

Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Mark 10:35-45

Today we heard a continuation of some of the scriptures that we've heard over the last week, which was the story of Job. For those of you who don't know who Job is, Job was a wealthy person from Uz who was considered to be blameless. Who God believed would be completely loyal. So an "accuser" – some of whom believe was Satan – decided to test this theory and put Job through a series of horrible things where he lost all of the things he loved and then he was put through suffering. So last week, we heard Job crying out to God, saying, "Where are you? I want to talk with you and plead my case."

This week, we hear what happens. As I said, Job was crying out, seeking to get a conference with God so that Job could argue his case. Job's friends had been questioning him about why he was being so loyal when so many horrible things were happening to him. But Job felt very strongly that he was right in trusting God and holding on hope that God would still be with him no matter what. This week, Job achieves his goal. God has answered and has come to chat with Job – but not in the way that Job really expected. It says, in verses 1-3 of Job 38: "Then God answered Job out of the whirlwind: 'Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Gird up your loins like a human; I will question you and you shall declare to me.'" Job is humbled in this response as God begins to question Job, for Job was the one that was going to question God and have God answer. God flipped this. God wants to know whether human beings can even understand God and God's ways.

This passage calls into question our image and our understanding of who God is. The traditional interpretation of God, in reference to the Book of Job, believes that this response of God is actually mocking Job. Pointing out how human beings can be very presumptuous, believing that we as humans have power and wisdom ourselves. This is then corroborated in the story we have heard in Mark, where we hear James and John fighting over who will be at the right hand and the left

hand of Jesus. Who will be next in line? Who will be given that privilege, that status?

John Calvin, who was a great theologian, believed that “the pious person humbly recognizes and consents that before God, we are nothing, therefore, we should bow in humbleness before the great mystery of God.”¹ This approach goes with the whole idea that God is mocking Job.

However, there is a different interpretation. More modern theologians, known as process theologians, have argued that God is not omnipotent. Now what we mean by omnipotent: it literally means that God has all the power that there is. God is a supreme power. However, the process theologians argue that if we stand firm in the belief that we are in relationship with God, then this doesn’t make sense. Paul E. Capetz explains that “in a relational understanding of reality – to which God is not an exception – the implementation of God’s goodwill is dependent upon free response of preachers to embrace God’s purpose for them as their own.”² That sense that we are in relationship with God, that we also make decisions.

There’s one other interpretation that is worth mentioning that comes from James Gustafson. He questions the past beliefs about God’s relationship to humanity. He suggests instead that “God is the source of human good – but is not the guarantor.”³

We are being asked to reflect and consider whether the story of Job affirms God’s absolute power and goodness...or, are we to affirm God’s goodness, but not God’s unlimited power...or do we qualify God’s goodness with respect to human beings while standing in awe of God’s power in the order of nature? How we understand God is reflected in our decisions, is reflected in how we feel we are being called by God to live in this world as a community of faith. The one thing that we can be sure of is that God is always with us, that God will not abandon us. I love that the first song that we sang talked about that. That God is here, with us this whole time.

We proclaim in our most recent statement of faith – called “A Song of Faith” – that “evil does not and cannot undermine or overcome the love of God. God

¹ John Calvin, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009). P. 172.

² Paul E. Capetz, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009). P. 172.

³ James Gustafson, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009). P. 174.

forgives and calls us to confess our fears and failings with honesty and humility. God reconciles and calls us to repent the part we have played in damaging our world, ourselves, and each other. And God finally transforms and calls us to protect the vulnerable. To pray for deliverance from evil, and to work with God for the healing of the world, that all might have abundant life.”⁴

I think today, what we are being reminded is of our humanity. I think we all need to take time to acknowledge often that we have our own ambitions. That sometimes our vanity, our self-absorption, can lead us to believe that we have more power than we do. The passage from Mark demonstrates that even the most faithful followers can get caught up in their own dreams of power and position. But we need to remember that God didn't send Jesus on earth to judge the world. Nor did God send any of us to do that. Like the disciples, we need to be cautious that we don't put ourselves first or above others. We are truly not in charge, although we like to be. Jesus reminds us through the story of James and John that our natural concept of leadership, which is associated with status and success, is not the vision of leadership that God nor Jesus has for us. God sent Jesus here on earth to serve, not to be served. And Jesus again shows us a different way of living and being.

Jesus' leadership is commonly known as “servant leadership”, which is powerful, but not in a humanistic way that we might imagine. The goal of servant leadership is the opposite of mainstream leadership, which is marked by prestige, acquisitions, and power over others. Servant leadership is about building up the people who are often forgotten. Who are stepped on, stepped over, diminished in this world. Jesus says, “The last shall be first, and the first shall be last.” So servant leadership is a call to serve others as we build each other up. Where we receive people who are struggling and support them, but not at the expense of our own self. Through this self-sacrifice, we actually end up becoming an even better version of ourselves. Through service, we are helping transform the world to what God is calling for: a kinship. If we serve one another in love and in humility, we are truly living out God's purpose here on earth. When we have a clear purpose as a community of faith, then we will be serving others by nurturing faith, by comforting hearts, by sharing the gifts we have been given, to live in a world where people are not exploited, not marginalized, and where human dignity is actually defended. And remember that like the disciples and like Job, it is very easy to become focused on ourselves, our own dreams of success and power. But

⁴ *A Song of Faith*, The United Church of Canada, 2006.

if we remember that Jesus came to serve and not be served, and thus we who follow Jesus will do what he did, we will learn from what he taught...therefore we too then will serve one another in love. And that's how we refrain from getting caught in that desire for success or privilege over others.

This is going to look differently for every single one of us, so don't go down the path of guilt right now feeling like you are not doing enough, for I truly believe that God has chosen every single one of you to do something special and unique. And when we are all living up to that call, that's when this world will live in harmony and love and trust. So I hope that you let this message of Job and the disciples inspire you to serve God, as God has called you to do. Share who you are and what you have with others, both within this church and in the world. And God will be satisfied. And God will say, "This is good." Thanks be to God. Amen.