

“A Friend in Need: Job”
Job 16:1-7; 42:7-9
Romans 13:8-10; Matthew 18:10-14

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I’m angry. Well, not personally. But if we think about that father and son pair we talked about last week, perhaps Jacob is coming to Isaac and saying, “Father, I’m angry. My friend Nathan got hurt and I’m mad at him. He should have been more careful.”

Isaac looks at Jacob and says, “I think there’s a story in our tradition that talks about that.”

Jacob says, “All right. Another story. Which one? I’ve probably heard it.”

“Yeah. It’s about Job.”

“Father, Job is all about unjust suffering. What’s it got to do with my anger?”

“Well, let’s look at it a little bit. You see, some things befall Job. One day some servants came to Job and tell him all that was going on. He was a rich man until that day. He lost all his camels; he lost all of his worldly wealth. And then, on top of that, he lost his children in a big windstorm.”

“Father, I don’t see what this has to do with Nathan at all.”

“Hang on. Job had this great experience of loss, and yet he was able to say, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb. Naked I shall return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.’ In all this, Job did not sin or do wrong.”

“OK, Father. I can kind of see that Nathan was perhaps a loss for me, but is that what you’re talking about?”

“No, let’s keep going. That wasn’t the end of Job’s troubles. Job then got really sick, too. He experienced the loss of his health, so he was sitting in ashes and he had these scabs all over him, and he was scraping himself. It was probably a pretty ugly sight. His wife came to him and said, ‘Why don’t you just curse God and die!’ But Job refused. He wouldn’t do it. And then his friends came and they sat with him for seven days. They sat in silence. It was a bad time.”

“Father, I don’t see what this has to do with Nathan.”

“Well, hang on. They sat there for seven days, and you sat with Nathan for a long time right after the accident, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah. I was pretty concerned about him.”

“And now you’re angry at him.”

“Yeah, very much so. Well, what happened with Job’s friends?”

“Well, once Job broke the ice, Job shouted, ‘Why did I ever live at all? I should have just died, or I should die now. God, why don’t you just let me die?’ That’s when his friends started ‘helping.’ Do you remember what kind of help they gave?”

“He didn’t really seem to appreciate what they had to say.”

“No, he didn’t. Do you remember what they said? Eliphaz, the first one, said, ‘Is not your fear of God your confidence, and the integrity of your ways your hope? Think now, who that was innocent is ever punished? Or were the upright ever cut off?’ What is he suggesting there? He is suggesting that it’s all Job’s fault. Somehow Job has not had integrity. Job wasn’t innocent and he’s now being punished.”

It keeps going. Bildad says basically the same kind of thing. Now, I suppose if we could read it in Hebrew we could get into the poetry of it, as well. It’s designed, I think, to engage us. If you read some of what Eliphaz or Bildad, or Zophar say, they make a lot of sense.

As they go on, Job says, “God, do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me.” Job knows of no reason that God would do this to him, and yet his friends are telling him God is punishing him. So he says, “God, tell me why?”

Zophar piles on with, “You know that God extracts of you less than your guilt deserves.” That’s comforting. And this goes on. There are three phases of this. One friend speaks; Job responds. The next one speaks; Job responds. The third one speaks; Job responds. And they do that three times. About half way through, Job tells his friends, “I have heard many such things; miserable comforters are you all.”

When we think about Job, we think about the unjust suffering, or problems of suffering. But what about those friends? Isn’t it a lot about them? If I were Isaac talking to Jacob, I might say, “Are you blaming Nathan for something he didn’t do? I saw the accident. That cart was out of control. Nathan stopped in the road to pick up something. When he looked up he saw it coming and tried to jump out of the way. The back of the cart just barely caught him—enough to break his arm and bruise some ribs, and put him out of commission for a while. But is your anger now helpful to him? In a lot of ways what we do is blame the one who’s suffering. It must be their fault. Isn’t that what all Job’s friends are doing, blaming him for his predicament?”

Of course, if we’ve read this book we remember at the beginning that it’s not because of Job at all. God has let Satan, the Tempter, put Job through a test. When we read it, we wonder why in the world God would do that. Of course, we’re still reading it over 2,000 years later; that might be one possibility. It’s helpful to us. It’s an

example. It's an acknowledgement that not everything that happens to a person is because the person did something wrong.

I think what I want to focus on this morning is what is the response of the friends? We have this tendency to do what Isaac and Jacob are talking about. Why is Jacob blaming his friend? Because he must have done something wrong to have been hurt, and so Jacob is angry with him. Does that help at all? Is it going to help their friendship?

We blame the victim. It's interesting to me that one of the messages of Job seems to be: be careful about blaming the victim, the one who is suffering, adding to their suffering by telling them it's all their fault and if only they would do such and so then they would be restored. As if we always know exactly what they should do.

Part of it is about compassion. Were Job's friends able to show compassion? If we think about that idea of compassion, that's one piece Job is able to identify, the book identifies. They didn't show compassion. They blamed instead of helping Job heal.

Of course, we could go beyond that and look at the New Testament stories as well. When Jesus tells the parable about the lost sheep, I think about a sheep being lost. Do we blame that sheep for being lost? *It's all that sheep's fault. It went off on its own because it wanted to.* Well, you know, my experience of sheep is that they do not want to be apart. That sheep did not get lost because it decided it didn't want to be with everybody else. Something happened. It got lost, and if a sheep is lost, it's distressed because it's not with its flock. So Jesus is going out to find the lost sheep. He's going out to find the one that's in distress. The parable is not saying that if a sheep gets lost, it deserves it and you shouldn't care about it any longer. You're going to have to let it find its way back and that will teach it. It doesn't say any of those things. It says if there's a lost sheep, I'm going to go find it.

I think it's the same thing when something's lost, when something's wrong, when there is suffering. It's not our role to judge it. I think it can happen for all kinds of reasons. There's an accident. There are reasons we get sick. Sometimes we even make bad choices. But you know, sometimes we make bad choices because we learned bad ways of seeing the world. Even our choices, when we try to make them right, can be wrong. What is Jesus inviting us to do? It's not to blame the one who made the wrong choice. It's to help heal them, bring them back.

What does Romans say? What do we owe one another? Does Romans say we owe each other judgment? Does it say what we owe is to punish one another? No. What we owe one another is love.

I think this really applies to our lives. One of the ways of thinking about how we experience life these days has to do with how children grow up. There's something called "adverse childhood experiences." People call it ACES. It turns out that for children who have several adverse childhood experiences, their adult health can be

affected. There's a correlation between those adverse childhood experiences and adult health. Why do I mention that? One thing is that children don't really have a choice about the experiences they are experiencing all the time, so it's not just that they chose something, but what they experience can affect their lives.

I think Jesus is doing two things with us. One is that he's trying to help us learn to live so we don't have those adverse experiences in our lives, whether they are childhood or adult. But on the other hand, we experience those moments of distress. We find ourselves at times to be the lost sheep. Or we know those who are. What he's pointing us toward is healing. Love is what we owe and that is what helps us heal. It helps us heal when we're cared for and not when we're blamed for everything we've done even though it may be wrong. It helps us heal when we can see there is another way, when we can recognize we still have value, when we can recognize that one would sit with us and not tell us how bad we are but accept that somewhere deep inside we are a child of God and we may need a lot of healing.

But what does Jesus rejoice over? The lost sheep; that bringing home; the healing that can happen. I don't want to hear God telling me that I was like Job's friends and said the wrong kinds of things. What it makes me think about is how easy it is for me to judge and to blame instead of to love. How easy it is for me to want it to be somebody else's fault and there's nothing I have to do. How can I help bring healing? How can I bring the grace of God?

Mother Theresa was a nun in India who became famous for helping people. One thing she said was, "Not all of us can do great things, but all of us can do small things with great love." It reminds me of how Jesus invites us to be engaged in finding the lost sheep, about healing one another, about being able to comfort instead of blame. Amen.