

Sermon Title: "Where are You?"

March 26, 2017

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Sycamore Congregational Church UCC

Scripture: Job 5: 1-10, 15-16; Psalm 145 13b-19

Opening prayer (offered spontaneously)

To whom do we turn when we need help? As an example, to whom do the students at Albany High School turn in the face of the cyber bullying that was reported last week?

Last Sunday I mentioned the scariest question Jesus ever asked, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me," and the even scarier question behind it, "God, do you really exist?" To be a person of faith is to periodically be willing to ask this question, to grapple with it, perhaps to be scared by it, and to find the answer to this question in one's own life.

To whom do we turn when we need help?

In the martial art of judo, there is a whole family of moves called *ashi-waza*, or foot sweeps. I remember learning basic forms of *ashi-waza*, as well the *equally* important art of falling *safely* as a young boy in my judo class. Done well, *ashi waza* is a way of quickly causing your opponent to instantly lose their balance and fall - as one or both feet are swept from under them.

In normal life, we can experience major life changes: when someone with long term health issues experiences a sudden change for the worse, when we lose a job, or someone says, "I don't love you anymore." As in *ashi-waza*, we suddenly lose our balance, our sense of who we are and our role in life is tossed up in the air. When my mother-in-law died, my sweet father-in-law cried and said, I don't know what to do without her...we were always together!

As some of you know, when a loved one takes a quick turn for the worse, a fall, or a serious infection, we can feel like the wind has been knocked out of us. Just like when we fall to the ground, when the wind is knocked out of us, there are moments when we actually can't breathe. We have to wait for the painful moments to pass so that our lungs can again fill with air. And then we gasp for air, we gasp for life itself.

If you have a theology that says that God is always in control or that God will always protect you, then your faith also can have the wind knocked out of it. As I mentioned last week, for some people, that loss of faith can damage their image of God and it may be gravely wounded for a long time. For some, they can no longer believe, if they feel that God is *both* in control and has turned God's back on them. On the other hand, if you believe that Jesus is always there to accompany you, no matter how bad the situation feels, than your heart calls out for Jesus: "Help me, Jesus!" you call out, or "help my loved one, Jesus!"

This question of *where* is God? – the silent God to whom we pray in silence – is an ancient one. We read it in the Book of Micah: "*where* is the Lord your God? And in Psalm 42: My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, "*Where* is your God?"

This is a central question for the Book of Job. Those of you that are familiar with it know that Job doesn't have the best of friends. One of them taunts Job as he is in terrible misery and pain, saying, "Call out. Will anyone answer you? To which holy one will you turn?" With friends like this, who needs enemies? As a quick aside, did you notice that the question was not, "call out to God", but "to which holy one will you turn", suggesting the possibility of multiple, not just one god.

Eventually, in the 42nd chapter, after listening to his terrible friends and hearing from God list the endless wonders God has created, Job's faith is restored. He accepts the unknowable depths of God and he calls out to Him:

'I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
"Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?"
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

God is too wonderful for us to know but don't let that ever stop you from trying to do so!

In a few moments we will receive our special offering, One Great Hour of Sharing. As an aside, if you miss the day when we receive this or any offerings, you can always give later, or give more, if you are so moved.

One Great Hour of Sharing, as part of Our Churches Wider Mission, is the special mission offering of the United Church of Christ that carries God's message of love and hope to people in crisis. The UCC works with international partners to provide sources of clean water, food, education and health care, small business micro-credit, advocacy and resettlement for refugees and displaced persons, and emergency relief and rehabilitation. OGHS also supports domestic and international ministries for disaster preparedness and response.

The UCC is one of seven denominations that, together, raise over \$10 million each year. About 60% supports international development initiatives across 138 countries, and the remainder funds disaster preparedness and response in the U.S. Of every dollar raised, 95 cents are used for mission and the remaining 5% are used to create interpretation materials. Administrative costs are paid by gifts to Our Church's Wider Mission National Basic Support – so this is a highly efficient way to help people around the world and here at home.

When I was in Cleveland a couple weeks ago for a meeting of the United Church Board, Jim Moos, our executive minister for Our Church's Wider Mission, talked about the work we support in India.

He met with an organization that helps sex workers learn skills so they can support themselves in better ways. Most of us have heard of the caste system, which was outlawed, but still is followed in India. The Dalit were once called the "untouchables" – think about that word for a second – can you imagine a system in which the majority of people would never touch or hug you? The Dalit do tasks no one else in India will do, such as slaughtering and skinning dead cows. Cows being considered sacred in India, so people of higher castes refuse to do this necessary work of

preparing meat which some will eat. There is even a hierarchy within the Dalits, and the agencies OGHs supports help those at the bottom of the Dalits – including those who survive by cleaning out septic tanks by hand.

The head of our United Church Fund, our denominations collection of 1200 investment funds, Don Hart, described his experience in meeting with Palestinians in the West Bank. Did you know that Israel fully prevents Palestinians from drawing water from the Jordan River? Israel also controls 71% of the aquifer water and the Palestinians only have access to 17%. As the aquifers get drained lower and lower, salt water starts seeping into the aquifer. When Don stayed with a Palestinian family, he noticed that they have dried salt around their mouths after they brush their teeth – because the Israelis get the purer water. In some areas, the Palestinians only receive 20 liters of water per person vs. the 50-100 liters the United Nations considers required for basic needs and health. In the U.S., we use over 500 liters per day.

Some of our leaders also traveled to Greece, which as we know, is one of the most common points of entry for immigrants escaping from Syria. I mention these stories in the context of our scriptures from Job and Psalm 145. When you and I give generously, *we* are the ones to whom people around the world turn. God works through *us* so that the poor, hungry, and distressed in 138 countries know that their voices to God, in every language and faith tradition, are heard.

Hear the words of the psalmist, which is both a prayer to God and to us:

All eyes look to you, hoping,
and you give them their food right on time, opening your hand
and satisfying the desire of every living thing.

In closing, I'd like to play a video, not about poor people but about God – and communion shared in the form of twinkies and apple juice:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9N8OXkN0Rk>

May we encounter God in unexpected people. May we be the unexpected people in whom others see and receive God. Amen.

Scripture:

Job 5: 1-10, 15-16

Liturgist:

Call out. Will anyone answer you?

To which holy one will you turn?

2 Surely anger can kill the foolish;
fury can kill the simple.

3 I've seen the foolish take root
and promptly curse their house.

4 Their children are far[a] from safety,
crushed in the gate without a deliverer.

5 The hungry devour[b] their crops;
it's taken even from the thorns,[c]
and the thirsty pant after their yield.
6 Surely trouble doesn't come from dust,
nor does distress sprout from the ground.
7 Surely humans are born to distress,
just as sparks rise up.

Moses:

8 But I would seek God,
put my case to God,
9 who does great things beyond comprehension,
wonderful things without number;
10 who provides rain over the earth's surface,
sends water to the open country,
15 Yet God rescues the orphan[d] from the sword of their mouth,
the needy from the grip of the strong;
16 so the poor have hope
and violence shuts its mouth.

Psalm 145 13b-19 (Liturgist)

The Lord is trustworthy in all that he says,
faithful in all that he does.[c]
14 The Lord supports all who fall down,
straightens up all who are bent low.
15 All eyes look to you, hoping,
and you give them their food right on time,
16 opening your hand
and satisfying the desire of every living thing.
17 The Lord is righteous in all his ways,
faithful in all his deeds.
18 The Lord is close to everyone who calls out to him,
to all who call out to him sincerely.
19 God shows favor to those who honor him,
listening to their cries for help and saving them.
May God add new understanding to our reading and hearing