

This morning, we conclude readings in the Book of Job, an amazing book that shifts the prevailing understanding of human suffering from a clear cause and effect formula to a less than clear recognition of God's freedom. Job's friends have argued Job must have done something wrong to receive the suffering he has endured. Job maintains his innocence and demands, and ultimately receives his day in court with God. Those here last week heard a portion of God's response out of the whirlwind in Job 38, centered on God as creator of the whole universe, whose motivations are beyond the limits of human comprehension. In this morning's reading, Job bows to God's majesty in a humble posture of contrition.

As our reading begins, God has just concluded posing to Job a number of "Where were you when I..." questions of the creator. Now, Job again offers a brief response, and Debbie and I will read responsively our lesson in chapter 42:

Then Job answered the Lord:

"I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

[Job then repeats a question God has posed]:

'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?'

[Then Job answers that question]:

Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

[Job then repeats God's words that Job would be interrogated by God]:

'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.'

[Then Job responds with humility and contrition]:

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

The core of the book of Job is a narrative story encompassing only the first two chapters, in which the Satan asks God for permission to test Job, and then the story's conclusion in the final eleven verses of the book. Yet, in between there are some forty chapters of wonderful and poetic discourse between Job and his friends, and Job and God, and Job's friends and God to form the whole of the Book of Job. We have reached the end of the poetic section. We now hear the narrative story's conclusion of the restoration of Job to full life.

And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before. Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the Lord had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring. The Lord blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys. He also had seven sons and three daughters. He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Keren-happuch. In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers. After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations. And Job died, old and full of days.

We now turn to the Gospel of Mark and hear of Jesus' last healing before he enters Jerusalem for the final week of his life. There is a blind man by the side of the road by the name of Bartimaeus calling out to Jesus to show him mercy. This is the second blind man Jesus will heal. In the first healing, the blind man was brought by others to Jesus. This time, the crowd of Jesus' followers seeks to keep Bartimaeus away from Jesus. When Jesus healed the first blind man in Bethsaida, he used his saliva and applied it to the man's eyes. Notice the difference this time. In all other healings in Mark's Gospel, the healed one is sent home, often told to remain silent about the healing. Listen for what Bartimaeus does after his sight is restored.

Let us hear God's word to us in Mark 10:46-52:

⁴⁶They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. ⁴⁷When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"⁴⁸ Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!"⁴⁹ Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you."⁵⁰ So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. ⁵¹Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again."⁵² Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

I'd like to address up front the sermon title, "I Have a Problem with Blessings," for I can imagine some might think, "Do we have to hear about Rick Otty's problems again? And in a sermon?" Allow me to explain my problem, not impose it on you.

Perhaps you have said, or heard someone else say, "I feel so blessed." Or, an older couple may reflect on their lives and say, "We have been so blessed in our lives." I know the words are almost always offered as an expression of deep gratitude, but still, the phrase sets off my alarm bell.

I cynically wonder who they think blessed them. Blessing is transitive. There is a bestower of blessing and a receiver of blessing – a blessing and a blessee, if you will. It even happens when one sneezes, when we boldly bestow, God's "bless you" on one who has filled a room with germs.

When one says one has been blessed, I take that to mean one is the blessee. Often the blessing remains unnamed, but I often sense God is the missing name, so what someone is really saying is, "We have been so blessed by God in our lives." My question is quite simply, "How do you know?" "How do you know your blessing has come from God?" Of course, if people said, "We have been so lucky in our lives," I also have a problem with that, because it leaves it's a vacuum, dependent on fate.

If we think God runs a blessing dispensary, then it is tempting to figure out how we can receive a dose of blessing. It would be natural to think of what we might do to be noticed by God, how we might be first in line, what good we can do or what evil we can avoid to encourage God to dispense a blessing on us. Of course, this borders on blessing being earned by our good works, which on the surface most of us reject. It is certainly not a part of our Reformation history.

I do not envision God as one who arises each day, completes whatever morning devotion God does, and then goes to a heavenly cubicle to dispense the day's blessings. I am wary of thinking of God as a blessing dispenser, but even more, of thinking of God as a blessing withholder. For, if we consider ourselves recipients of God's blessing, then it seems we might subconsciously believe there are others from whom God withholds blessings. We don't call them the unblessed, but something like the "less fortunate."

I believe this is where the Book of Job steps in. Again, Job is a transition book in Jewish thought and theology. Prior to Job, there was an accepted cause and effect belief that a person's suffering or trouble is linked to his or her sin. Some still hold to a notion that natural and human disasters can be traced to human or national sin, though I often find the purveyors of this thought always point to someone else's sin as the cause. The three friends of Job argue this belief as they seek to have Job just confess his sin. God clearly corrects that notion.

Still, having a clear formula for understanding God's ways is inviting. Particularly when times are tough, when we are struggling, we would like to have a clear if-then, cause and effect checklist for how to coax a needed blessing, or healing, or inner peace out of God. Put another way, we want to know how best to pray to alert God to act on our requests. Yet, God's word to Job out of the whirlwind dismisses any notion there is some mysterious formula we can discover to know God's ways.

Job comes to know the ways of the creator God are beyond his comprehension. God is free. As professor Kathleen O'Connor writes, "Across his speeches, Job insists that God does not follow any laws, but is wildly free beyond any human calculation, yet Job speaks his anger and grief to God anyway." [Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 198]

As the book of Job concludes, she writes, "And now Job receives his blessing." What a blessing! Job receives twice as much livestock, a full restoration of his family and children and fortune, and a life so long he knows his great, great grandchildren. But wait! Are we to believe Job is being rewarded for good behavior, or simply for not cursing God for his suffering? That would seem to go against the whole thrust of the book which questions the prevailing cause and effect model of God's actions.

Kathleen O'Connor considers the paradox, asking, "Is it reward or is it grace?" [ibid.] If the Book of Job sets aside the belief human suffering is God's judgment on human sin, does it not also set aside the idea God rewards good behavior? I think it does, and as a result, we are left with grace, but not grace according to a human formula, but the free range grace of a God whose ways are beyond our comprehension.

What I realize is grace and blessing are very similar, and I don't have a problem with grace, just cheap grace. So, I now think my real problem is not with blessing, but cheap blessing.

We say we feel blessed by God. If that is true, it is an incredible action on God's part, an act of grace and mercy, which by necessity calls for a response. Blessing received without a response of humble gratitude can lead to a prideful sense of God finding us more deserving, even if we don't say it. It is, in essence, self-conferred grace. That is what I find problematic, for we are actually saying we know God's motives, the very thing the book of Job refutes.

If we can set aside any notion that blessing or grace are received as a result of our goodness or good works, or that we have earned God's favor, we avoid any pride God has somehow favored us above others. I think one test of whether we truly believe God's blessing or grace is free and unearned, not a result of our actions, might be if we ask ourselves, "What am I going to do with my blessing, this free gift of grace?"

That seems to me where the story of blind Bartimaeus fits in. Fortunately, Jesus heard Bartimaeus' shouts because the crowd following Jesus was doing everything possible to try to quiet him. Jesus tells the crowd to bring Bartimaeus to him. Then, incredibly, Jesus asks the blind man, "*What do you want me to do for you?*"

Okay, time out. Who among us would not love to have Jesus ask us, "What do you want me to do for you?" I mean this seems to be a genie in a bottle moment, and though genies usually offer three wishes, I will take Jesus' single offer. Yet, what will I say I want Jesus to do for me? You may recall in last week's Gospel reading, Jesus asked disciples James and John the exact same question, "*What do you want me to do for you?*" You may also recall, the two disciples blew their chance because they asked for seats of honor at his side when Jesus came into his Kingdom. Jesus told them the seating chart for heaven was not his to determine, but God's.

In one sense, Bartimaeus' request to see again is as personal as the two disciples' desire, though he did not ask for a place of honor. This time the healing occurs with touch, as Jesus declares, "Go, your faith has made you well." Immediately, his sight returned. "Go, your faith has made you well." On this Reformation Sunday, we notice it is not Bartimaeus' good works, or even his righteous character, but his faith Jesus commends, understanding faith is a free gift of God we accept, not something we earn.

Yet, my eyes look past the healing, as something amazing happens. Jesus says, "Go, your faith has made you well." But, Bartimaeus does not "Go," as so many of the healed have done, but he stays, and follows Jesus on the way. In the very next verse, Jesus will enter Jerusalem for his passion. Bartimaeus will be with him.

When blessing and grace are seen as reward for good behavior, as one senses in James and John's request for a place of honor, it is easy for this to lead to pride in self. By contrast, when grace and blessing are received in humility, as we sense with Bartimaeus, there emerges a desire to respond out of a deep feeling of gratitude.

That is the heart of what we call stewardship as people of faith. We respond to God's blessing and grace, not out of obligation or to earn more favor, but simply with a heart of gratitude. "I am so blessed, I have to respond with generosity." The church then becomes a place where our mutual gratitudes and generousities come together to support ministry. If the Presbyterian Church in Sudbury is a blessing, we respond with our support, including our money, not just for our favorite mission or program, but the entire ministry of the congregation.

As I worked with these texts, and faced my problem with the word blessing, a thought came to mind. I began to reconceive blessing to be receiving sight. The phrase, "I have been so blessed," then becomes, "I can now see better." Job put it this way, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you..." Bartimaeus received his sight and responded with a decision to follow Jesus.

Within this healing story there is also a subtle challenge it might be easy to miss, but we do well to keep with us as a reminder. When Jesus tells the crowd to bring Bartimaeus to him, I think he is also calling the crowd to come to him. They had errantly tried to keep blind Bartimaeus from reaching Jesus. So, when Jesus says, "*Call him here.*," I also hear him saying, "And bring yourselves along as well, for there is more than one person here today in need of receiving sight."