

Persist to Resist

Pray with me. Dearest and most holy God, we come before you today as empty vessels waiting to be guided by the wisdom of your Word. We pray for discerning hearts that we may hear what you would have us to hear so that we may do what you would have us do. Accordingly, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O God our strength and our redeemer.

The third molar teeth consist of the mandibular and maxillary third molars. These teeth are called-- wisdom teeth. They are called Wisdom teeth because usually they come in when a person is between age 17 and 25 or older—old enough to have supposedly gained some wisdom. Now that is a fairly technical yet clear definition of what these late arriving teeth are that rest in both the lower and upper jawbone. I'd like to ask, with a show of hands, how many of us in this room have had or know someone who has had a bad experience with Wisdom teeth? Some of us even squirm at the mention of the things.

I started wondering the other day, just why are they called Wisdom teeth? Maybe it *is* because they come in after we have gained a little bit of wisdom from our years. I mean I remember thinking I had a lot of wisdom between 17 and 25. Some of us do? But at what cost? What is the price of Wisdom? It seems the

model behind naming this set of teeth, Wisdom teeth, is based on surviving discomfort in the least and suffering at best. Really? Is that what wisdom is all about, the ability to persist through the pain to resist living in foolishness? Conventional wisdom would have us believe that this is true. As an artist I am way too familiar with the idea of needing to suffer for my art. What if Wisdom doesn't demand suffering? Sometimes the stories, books, films about the sufferings of its characters are meant to let us know that we can also learn without a complete plunge into the abyss.

Job is just such a text. It is part of the Jewish Wisdom tradition like Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Texts that were at the foundation of moral and ethical education for the children of the nation of Israel. Job is a mystery in biblical scholarship. There is no clear date of when it was written, the city of Uz where his story takes place has never been found, and it uses a hodgepodge of literary devices to tell its story. But what you and I know is that Job's suffering is still has lessons for us today.

Job, Job is the righteous man that God points out to Satan as one of the shining stars of humanity. Job, Job is the righteous man that Satan is sure will turn on God if God will only lift a hand of protection from around him. Job, Job is the righteous man whose suffering is so monolithic, so iconic we often look to him to try to find the answer to that nagging question of life, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Is it because God is allowing us to be tested? Is it because doing the right thing is no guarantee for a good life? Is it because God we are to learn that God will see us through the bad times if we just hold on? These are the larger questions in life for which we so desperately want to find answers. I can only venture to say that through prayer, discernment and study of the Bible we find our own ways to deal with these questions. I have no answers for you today but do know that God’s grace does comfort if we can just hold onto that grace when we are faced with life’s toughest situations.

But let’s try something a little different here today. Let’s try to use Job as our Wisdom text and see what it might have to say

for *our* moral and ethical code today. In the verses read earlier Job's wife responds to his suffering by asking, "'Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.'" And while he sits there trying to ease his suffering by taking a shard from a clay pot to scrape his sores (not the most pleasant of biblical images to be sure) he answers her. "You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" And our section of scriptures ends with the pronouncement, "In all this Job did not sin with his lips. I always hear that line as if I'm watching one of those epic bible movies, "IN ALL THIS, JOB DID NOT SIN WITH HIS LIPS". The booming voice over is so certain that we almost think we hear words to finish the sentence, "Job did not sin with his lips...against God."

But we already know that Job is righteous when it comes to God. That's why he's the hero of the story in the first place. What if we were to look at Job as a model for human behavior? What if we were to look toward Job to teach us something about how we

treat one another? Let's give it a try. Now historically we know that Job would have been part of patriarchal family systems. We also know that his wife would have been out of place to say such a thing to him, that her words alone are a bold move for a woman in her world. But then again, many women of the bible only get mentioned if they *are* doing something bold or taking a stand for something whether we think it's right or not. For Eve, it's the apple. Hannah's prays for a son, who becomes the prophet Samuel. Ruth follows Naomi to a strange land. Esther saves her people from slaughter. And so it is with the unnamed woman known only as Job's wife.

Growing up I always heard Job's wife yelling at him in my mind when she tells him to curse God and die. But now I think differently. Here is a woman whose only identity is in her husband, whose wealth is defined by her children. In all that is going on with Job, we often forget that she has seen the death of all of her children as well. We tend to forget that she is grieving so deeply and so badly. We tend to judge her as harshly as Job does.

I no longer see her screaming at Job. I actually see her face still-unmovable- her eyes unable to cry another tear. I hear her voice ringing in my head, “Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.” Save yourself from suffering, let go of this life, Job. Maybe, just maybe she loves him. But if he were to die what would become of her? She would be the widow that we so often read about as the lowest person in society-no children, no property, no longer desirable to men because of what has befallen her. In Job’s death, her misery would be complete and she would wither away in pain and in grief.

And Job, Job responds by calling her a fool. Chastising her for accepting the good from God but not the bad. Even though in *his* death, she accepts a fate worth than death. And our author says, “In all of this, Job did not sin with his lips.”

And so my friends, Job the righteous may not have sinned with his lips. But it might just be that he did wrong his grieving wife. Now I know, I know “But he was sitting on the ash heap, trying to find some relief...it was his pain that was talking!” But

then we get into the endless circle of debate trying to answer the question but whose pain is worse? And that question just leads to a dead end. Festering sores and grieving souls are different sufferings to be sure but no one, no one can know just how bad another's suffering is until you have to go through it yourself. Suffering is suffering, period.

I started thinking about this scripture some time ago and during that process I kept asking myself, "So what is this interaction between Job and his wife saying to me, in this time." And I had to do a little self examination. Now I am involved in many social justice struggles. I do my best to stay aware of inequities, to speak out when needed; I've been a part of prayer vigil/protests outside of restaurants with unfair practices in midtown New York. I had always admired folks who stood up for what they believed and started to feel good that I was becoming one of those people on a more regular basis. I think it is a powerful force in this world when we all stand up for what is right. Not that we have the time, inclination, money or resources to fight

for every cause we feel is right. I'm not about blaming people for not getting involved enough. My concern is more for what God is calling us to do for social justice in our hearts. You see, doing what's right isn't just about the cause it is also about stepping into the grace that God has blessed upon us; becoming the people of God that God wants us to be. Jesus spoke of a new kingdom, speaks of a new kin-dom, in family with one another, not just a place but a state of being.

In a few moments we will be share a meal with millions of people around the world. It is World Communion Sunday. We will more or less all say the same words, through this act of remembrance the Holy Spirit will allow us sit at the table with Christ and a family of Christians around the world. But there is a miracle in this meal that changes us on the inside. That's the true power of this day, that we stop to think about the awesome power of the change that each and every person taking communion today will undergo. And it is that power harnessed that can bring about the new kingdom, kin-dom, a new state of being.

And so it is when we fight for the good cause. It is not just the acts we do but the changes that happen inside of us. Sometimes we get a little like Job. We are happy in our righteousness, in our uprightness. We persist in our faith through all circumstances and do our best to trust God no matter what. But sometimes, just sometimes we forget about the pain of the person standing right beside us. Sometimes we call those suffering people in our midst foolish. There are those of us who walk down a busy city street and stop to buy a sandwich for a hungry person standing outside of a deli. Those of us who even slip a little money in the bag with that sandwich. And there are those of us who, when we walk away, do so in humility. But then we think to ourselves, “What did they do to get themselves in that situation?” And that, my friends is when we are like Job. In our righteousness and even in our sufferings blame the nameless woman we have just bought a sandwich her own state; however compassionately we ask ourselves that question. We give money to a cause and wait for the thank you letter instead of telling the organization save the cost of

a stamp to help somebody else because every penny counts. It reminds me of what a person told me in Nashville, TN a few years back discussing the soup kitchen ministries of that city. She told me, “While we appreciate and certainly do need the help of the churches and soup kitchens. We still would rather have a home to cook our own soup in!”

I don’t say all of this to accuse us of not fighting hard enough for social justice causes. I say this so that we don’t become complacent and think that we have ever found all of the answer. I just want us to Persist to Resist. Persist in being creative and innovative in our programming to helps those less fortunate, resist thinking our one program fits all needs. Persist in being vigilant as to how your donations to organizations are used; resist the urge to give only for an end of the year tax write off. Persist in speaking truth to power; resist ever saying, “Well, there’s nothing I can do.” Persist in walking with Christ, praying, reading the Bible, fellowshiping in church-resist the notion that we can fight the good fight on our own. Persist in getting to know the people and

the stories behind the struggle, resist doing social justice just because. Persist in asking as they do in Hebrews today, “What are human beings, O God, that you are mindful of them?” But most of all persist in growing into the fullness of your grace and if you do this I dare you, I double dog dare you to resist the power of the love of Jesus Christ in your life. Amen