

God and Suffering: Four Sermons on the Book of Job

Sermon 2: On Being a Friend to the Suffering

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Luke 10:29-37 and Job 22:1-11

Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered: "Can a mortal be of use to God? Can even the wisest be of service to him? Is it any pleasure to the Almighty if you are righteous, or is it gain to him if you make your ways blameless? Is it for your piety that he reproves you, and enters into judgment with you?"

Is not your wickedness great? There is no end to your iniquities. For you have exacted pledges from your family for no reason, and stripped the naked of their clothing. You have given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry. The powerful possess the land, and the favored live in it. You have sent widows away empty-handed, and the arms of the orphans you have crushed. Therefore snares are around you, and sudden terror overwhelms you, or darkness so that you cannot see; a flood of water covers you.

I was twenty-four in the late-summer of 1995 when I arrived in the town of Midway, North Carolina to begin my seminary local church internship. Almost as soon as I entered the office of this small country church, the pastor informed me that my first assignment would be to drive the dozen miles or so into Winston-Salem and visit Eleanor Zurbrick who was a patient at the Baptist hospital there. Eleanor, he told me, was the oldest member of Oak Forest United Methodist Church.

As I arrived at the hospital I am not sure what I was thinking I would do. I had never visited anyone in the hospital, except for my own grandparents, and I had only been a patient in a hospital a couple of times myself. When I entered the room I introduced myself to Mrs. Zurbrick and sat down. I explained that I was the intern at the church, and that I would be there for a few months. It was then that she very proudly asked me if I knew that she was the oldest member of the church. I told her that I did, and she smiled and with great pride said, "I'm ninety-three."

What happened next, each time I remember it, happens in my mind in slow-motion, like an automobile accident. When she told me her age, the first words out of my mouth were, "Oh really? That's how old my grandfather was when he died."

She gave me a sweet, interested, loving, gracious smile, that seemed to convey, "Good luck, son." From this inauspicious start began my career in ordained ministry.

Last week, I read some excerpts from the journal that C.S. Lewis kept after the death of his wife. The journal is now known as the book *A Grief Observed*. In last week's excerpts, Lewis writes that, in the midst of his grief, God seems absent, and that his fear was not that God did not exist, but that the God who had taken his wife from him was actually malevolent, or a Cosmic Sadist, to use Lewis' words.

I'd like to share with you some of Lewis' words again from *A Grief Observed*, again from chapter one:

“An odd byproduct of my loss is that I am aware of being an embarrassment to everyone I meet. At work, at the club, in the street, I see people, as they approach me, trying to make up their minds whether or not they'll ‘say something about it’ or not. I hate it if they do, and if they don't. Some funk it altogether. R. has been avoiding me for a week. I like best the well brought-up young men, almost boys, who walk up to me as if I were the dentist, turn very red, get it over, and then edge away to the bar as quickly as they decently can. Perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers.”¹

As both my story and Lewis' story illustrate, it is easy to be afraid of people who suffer, mainly because we are afraid of saying the wrong thing, or because we are afraid of reminding a person of his or her suffering, as if he or she wasn't already aware. We are afraid of conjuring up a painful, long forgotten memory of days past, or we are afraid of not knowing what to say at all.

In this morning's we discover one of Job's three friends who appear on the scene early in the story, soon after Job loses his fortune, his ten children, and his reputation. These three friends were not worried about saying the wrong thing, despite the fact that they argue with Job for most of the book that bears his name. The crux of their speeches to Job revolve around their belief, one that would have been common in the ancient world, that Job's suffering and loss were Job's own fault, and that perhaps if Job would just admit his fault and beg for God's mercy, God may forgive him.

It sounds like an ancient way to think about the consequences of right and wrong, primitive and brutal, but we are closer to it when we think. Ask yourself when was the last time you saw a homeless person and wondered, somewhere in the back of your mind, what he or she did to get themselves in that situation.

Yet, the problem with this text is that the Book of Job goes into detail to explain that Job's friends are wrong, that Job really is innocent and righteous. In fact, Job is so righteous that God literally brags about how good he is.

Job's friends pull no punches. Eliphaz says, Is not your wickedness great? There is no end to your iniquities. For you have exacted pledges from your family for no reason, and stripped the naked of their clothing. You have given no water to the weary to drink, and you have withheld bread from the hungry. The powerful possess the land, and the favored live in it. You have sent widows away empty-handed, and the arms of the orphans you have crushed. Therefore snares are around you, and sudden terror overwhelms you, or darkness so that you cannot see; a flood of water covers you.”

Being a friend to the suffering is not as hard as it sometimes seems. It need not scare or embarrass us as it seemed to embarrass those “red-faced young men” in C.S. Lewis' example. Often times we do things of great import without realizing how important they really are. I

¹ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, in *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics*, Harper-Collins, New York, 2002, p. 660.

believe that Christians generally excel at the art of vital, critically important small things. St. Francis of Assisi famously remarked that we should “preach the gospel at all times and if necessary, use words.”

So we set up a schedule for bringing by homemade meals. We send cards and flowers. We write little notes, if only because that person crossed our mind today. We stop by. We pick up the telephone. We remember to include those people in outings, understanding if they don't accept, and taking them as we find them if they do. I remember several times when I was overwhelmed with life and work and a new baby in the parsonage, and I would drive home for an hour or two before my evening meetings and discover that my neighbor V.L. James had cut my grass or raked my leaves.

I think that too often, we sell ourselves short, and we allow our fears to get the best of us. Yet it is through the aggregate of those tiny acts of love, support, kindness, and grace, that often God's kingdom arrives in our midst.

Pee Wee Reese was an infielder for the Brooklyn (and later Los Angeles) Dodgers who is also remembered for being a brave and strong supporter of Jackie Robinson, the first black Major League baseball player. Reese had virtually no experience interacting with minorities. In fact, his meeting Robinson marked the first time in his life that he had shaken hands with a black man.

He refused to sign a petition threatening a boycott if Jackie Robinson joined the team. In 1947, after Robinson had joined the team, the Dodgers were playing their first road trip, when Robinson was brutally heckled by fans in Cincinnati during pre-game practice. Reese was the captain of the team, and he walked over to Robinson, engaged him in conversation, and put his arm around his shoulder in a gesture of support which silenced the crowd. This gesture is depicted in a bronze sculpture that stands in Brooklyn today.²

A conversation, a hand on the shoulder, a visit, a call. Never underestimate the power of your presence with someone who is suffering, which brings me to what Job's friends did right: they were there. Their advice was not the best, but I do believe that they did the best they could based on what they knew about themselves and what they knew about God. If anything, they could have assumed that, because Job was a sinful man who had brought his misfortunes upon himself, or assumed that since Job had nothing to offer anyone, that there was nothing

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pee_Wee_Reese#Jackie_Robinson