

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Robert Alexander
“Companions in Christ”
Job 2:11-13, Galatians 6:1-5
11th Sunday after Pentecost
July 31, 2016

Read Galatians 6:1-5.

Once there was a man named Job.

He was a righteous and upright man from the land of Uz. He was respected by everyone – generous, kind, thoughtful, and blessed! Really blessed! He had a large family – 3 daughters and 7 sons – lots of land and cattle and herds of camels, donkeys, oxen, etc. You get the picture. He was well off and life was really good for Job.

One day that all ended. Calamity struck! First he received word that an invading army had come through some of his land and had killed his servants and carried off his herds. Then he found out that a wildfire had swept through some of his lands destroying all of his sheep. Then he got a message that his children were all gathered at one of their homes and a tornado swept through, bringing the house to its foundation and killing all of his children. After all this – Job was miserable with grief – but the challenges were not over – he was struck with a skin disease that left him with puss, oozing sores all over his body. From his head to his feet, the sores covered him making him unrecognizable.

Job sat among the ashes and wept in his misery.

His wife, who had survived all of this, spoke out of her own grief and anger – **“Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die.”**

But Job said, **“You speak foolishly. Shall we receive the good at the hands of God and not receive the bad?”**

In all this Job did not sin.

Read Job 2:11-13.

Read Lamentations 3: 1-9, 16-20 with music playing in the background.

Finally Job spoke. **“Let the day perish in which I was born. Let gloom and deep darkness claim it. Why did I not die at birth?”**

Over the next 29 chapters of the book of Job, his three friends confront him with judgement and rebuke as they try and understand the reason and the meaning of his suffering.

(PICTURE OF William Blake Painting on screen)

Job – can't you be just a little more patient?

Job – don't be so pious and self-righteous. What did you do to deserve this?

Job – why do you think God is punishing you in this way?

Well – I realize that this isn't the most uplifting way to begin a sermon. The story of Job is a tragic story in many ways – even if it does have a happy ending with Job receiving even more blessing from God. I have chosen not to focus on the heavenly courtroom drama between God and the accuser – Satan – who brings about all this death and destruction. We will not consider perhaps the major question of Job which is the reason and purpose of suffering in our world. The story, in my opinion, doesn't ever really give a satisfactory answer to that question but rather invites the reader to place their full trust in the God who created the heavens and the earth and who loves us in the midst of and through our pain and suffering. I would like to suggest that the text acknowledges the problem of pain, of evil, and of suffering while at the same time inviting us to partner with God in the important work of holding others in the midst of their pain and “Suffering along side them.”

In other words – the story of Job is an opportunity to consider how we might have compassion on others who are going through difficulty.

(image on screen of “Compassion”) – The word compassion comes from a combination of two words – “Com” and “Pati” – to suffer with – or to suffer alongside. And Job’s friends certainly start out in this way by sitting with Job for seven days and seven nights. When Job breaks the silence, they feel compelled to rebuke him and accuse him as they wrestle with the meaning of his suffering.

There is an old Dilbert cartoon that shows Dilbert in his office working when one of his co-workers, Alice, comes to him and says “I’m going to seek relief from my many woes by sharing them with you.” She continues – “My entire family is in a coma, the cat ate my wedding ring, the IRS is auditing us, my boss made a pass at me.” She pauses for a moment and then continues...”This isn’t working – you aren’t absorbing my woes!” Dilbert responds, “I’m wearing anti-woe cologne!”

Sometimes we don’t want to be with people in their pain. We don’t want to listen to others as they share their struggles or work out their own grief and yet, I believe that, as people of faith, this is what we are called to do.

In the midst of the telling of the story of Job I read a selection from the Old Testament book of Lamentations. These are not Job’s words but rather, from a writer who has experienced something terrible in their own lives. They struggle to make meaning of their suffering. They cry out to God and even blame God – something that perhaps you have done at some point in your own life. I stopped with the verse – “My soul is bowed down within me.”

The very next verses are some of my favorite in all of scripture – “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God’s mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Lamentations 3:21-23

The writer of Lamentations arrives at the conclusion that God is faithful even when they don’t see it or can’t make sense of what is happening in their lives. But sometimes in the midst of our pain and suffering, we aren’t able to get to those final verses. Sometimes we are so exhausted and beat down and hurting so badly that all we see is darkness. It doesn’t matter to that person that the darkness isn’t dark to God as Psalm 139 states. The persons experience is darkness...and that is when they need a friend more than any other time.

Today I ask, Are you able to be such a friend? Am I able to be such a friend?

One of the wonderful ministries of our congregation and of many congregations around the world is Stephen Ministry. The training that Stephen Ministry provides helps people to walk alongside others in the midst of their pain and suffering. They are always looking for more people to receive the training to become Stephen Ministers or Stephen Leaders. We especially need men to take this on. For some reason – men don’t seem to think this is an important ministry for them...but seriously...who wouldn’t be blessed by someone trained to walk alongside them during a dark time...through a particularly deep valley?

There are many things that we can learn from the training of Stephen Ministry.

Here are a few things that all of us can do.

- 1) Show Up – Respond to that gut feeling to show up and offer a hug or call or text and let them know that you are there for them no matter what.
- 2) Listen and Be Present – Provide a listening ear whenever they are ready to talk. Be a non-anxious presence without judgement as they wrestle with their situation, cry out to God, and work through their own grief.
- 3) Do Something Practical to Make a Difference – Look for some way to contribute with a practical gift. Refrain from comments like, “If there is anything I can do to help, please let me know.” Pay attention and act with a meal, a card, a donation, a ride, some help around the house, or whatever needs to be done.

- 4) Stay and Remain Faithful – Stay for the long haul and demonstrate the steadfast love of the Lord through your consistency and commitment to that person.
- 5) Trust That You are the Presence of God to that Friend – Remember that God is using you to demonstrate God’s love and to be the presence of Christ for that friend.

In the movie **The Return of the King**, Hobbit Sam accompanies Hobbit Frodo to destroy the one ring of power. This ring represents the temptation that humans feel for power – to control their own lives and their own destiny. Frodo has been charged with destroying this ring and near the end of the journey the ring becomes an unbearable burden for Frodo. Throughout the journey Sam has supported and encouraged Frodo and in one moving scene he seeks to encourage him with hope to press on through the darkness.

Sam tries to fill Frodo with hopeful images of the good times reminding him that life will surely return to such goodness even though it is hard to imagine under the weight of the burden he is carrying. Frodo cannot see what Sam describes.

Finally, Sam tells him, “Mr. Frodo – I may not be able to carry the ring for you...but I can carry you!” At this he picks him up and begins to carry him up the hill.

Video Clip from “Return of the King”.

Here we find a wonderful image of what we are called to be for one another. “Carry One Another’s Burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ,” wrote the Apostle Paul to the church in Galatia. This Law of Christ is the Law of Love – the Law that had been set down centuries and generations before as the means by which we might be whole and live in wholeness and peace with one another. Jesus came to help us understand how to live that way with one another – through good times and bad – through joy and sorrow – through bright times and dark times. And this doesn’t simply apply to those whom we consider close friends. I think we are meant to look for the open doors – the opportunities to show compassion, to carry the burdens of others, and to be Companions in Christ.

The word companion is the combination of two latin words – com + panis. Literally it means “bread fellow.” Your companion is one with whom you break bread. In other words, your companion is one who sits with you and is nurtured along the journey of life. Companions in Christ are also nourished by the life giving “Bread of Life” that is Jesus Christ.

I heard a story recently that brought new meaning to this notion of “Bread Fellow.”

Larry Trapp Story – Rabbi Michael Weisser and his wife Julia moved from New York to Lincoln, Nebraska. Several days after they moved into their home they received a distressing phone call – “You’ll be sorry you ever moved into that house, Jew boy.” The person on the other end of the phone said. Michael called the police and they came to take a report. They said that they thought they knew who had made the phone call – a man named Larry Trap who was known in the area as the kind of person who would make statements like that.

Several days later they received a package in the mail with lots of offensive literature. Again they called the police and they came to take a report but said they couldn’t really do anything because there was no proof. They suggested that the couple take precautions by having their children avoid taking the same route home each day.

Michael was upset and couldn’t let go of the question – why would someone treat them this way? He found Larry Trap’s phone number and called and left a message. He continued to call on a weekly basis and left what he called “Little Love Notes” on Larry Trap’s voicemail. “I heard you were disabled and I thought you might like to have a ride to the grocery store.” Or “There’s a lot of love in the world Larry and you aren’t getting any of it. Don’t you want some?”

One day when Michael called Larry answered the phone – “What do you want? Why are you hassling me?” Michael said, “I don’t want to hassle you – I just heard that you were disabled and I thought you might like to have a ride to the grocery store.” SILENCE on the other end of the phone.

“I want to get out of what I am doing and I don’t know how.”

Michael Weisser went to his house with some food to “break bread” with him. He knocked on the door and when Larry opened it he was sitting there in his wheelchair with a gun in his lap. Michael was scared but he reached out his hand to shake hands with Larry. At this Larry burst into tears.

He showed him rings on his fingers that had swastikas – and said, “Take these away from me. They have caused me nothing but trouble in my life.” Larry told Michael his life story about an abusive family that was filled with hatred, violence, and prejudice and how Michael had tried to make his own father proud of him by practicing his own flavor of racism, hatred, and bigotry. That day a friendship began between the two. Several years after this, Larry got sick and had no family to care for him. Michael and Julia invited him to come and live with them and after 9 months in their home he passed away. During that time he converted to Judaism and requested that Michael conduct his service. Because Larry had spent time making amends and finding forgiveness from the many people he had harmed over the years the place where the service was held was filled with mourners. Larry Trap had experienced a kind of rebirth through the life giving words of someone who would not accept things being the way they were. He took a risk and was blessed in tremendous ways.

“Speak Life”

The Christian musician TobyMac recently wrote the song “Speak Life” after reading the book “Abba’s Child” by Brennan Manning. In that book Manning makes the claim that every day we interact with people and we either speak life into their existence or we rob them of it. We either build them up or tear them down. There is no in between. The words of the chorus of the song are

So Speak life. Speak life. To the deadest, darkest night.
Speak life. Speak life. When the sun won’t shine and you don’t know why.
Look into the eyes of the brokenhearted
Watch them come alive as soon as you speak hope,
You speak love, you speak...
You speak life!

Friends – as we journey together, may we find that we are Companions in Christ, “Bread Fellows”, speaking life into each dark corner of the world and carrying one another through the valleys of life!

To God be the Glory! Amen.