Sermon from
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Thirteenh Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Amy Vigesaa

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Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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Pete Strom, a friend of mine from high school, did a TedTalk a while back, titled "Butter Side Up". In it, he talks about his sister, Carmen, who was born with learning disabilities that left her functioning at a 5-year-old level of communication and dependency. Now, I knew Carmen a little bit, and she loved my dad. She was a sweet person. But Pete always held this question in his heart, "Why her and not me?" "Why did life for him always seem to land butter side up while his sister struggled with disability?" These are questions all of us ask in our own way as we try to make sense of suffering through our own wisdom and understanding. This is natural. My friend, Pete, concluded that 99.9% of life is grace (or if you prefer the secular cousin: luck)- things we didn't earn and things we don't deserve. Our egos push back at that notion, but how do we explain the way of things- when bad things happen to good people or when good things happen to bad people?

Let me introduce you to Job. Some of you might know the story of Job, some of you may not. Job is a book in the bible that attempts to address these questions. Biblical scholars believe the book to be a thought experiment meant to tackle the question of human suffering. It is a form of literature meant to communicate a truth rather than a true story. In the first chapter, the Satan, who is named in the book as the Accuser, roamed earth freely witnessing the ways of humanity. This Accuser made a wager with God. See, God was pleased with this man, Job, for he was a righteous man, pious and attentive to the law, making sacrifices for his sins and the sins of his children just to make sure they were right with God. But the Satan believed Job only lived to please God because of all the blessings in his life: Job was wealthy and had many children. If he was brought low and all those blessings were taken away, surely Job would crumble and turn against God. So, the deal was made for Satan to strike all Job held dear, with one condition- don't kill Job. In one fell swoop, Job lost his livelihood, his servants were killed, and then all 10 of his children died. Still Job remained faithful to God. Then, he became sick and had boils and blisters on his skin. Life was miserable. Job began complaining. He got upset, calling out the injustice of the situation. Everything had fallen apart- not one string of the tapestry of life remained in place. He had done nothing wrong, in fact, he had done everything right. He was a good person, a righteous man. How could this have happened?

Author and cancer survivor, Kate Bowler, said in an interview, "It's hard when you assume that your intellect or your hard work or your anything is going to get you out of the pit you're in, and then it just doesn't. And you realize that

almost everything that makes your life work is contingent on factors that you have almost no control over, and usually no control over at all."

How often we expect to be rewarded with happiness and prosperity for doing what is right. Pete came to the conclusion that, [Without the lens of grace] ego looks at the hand we're dealt, and it creates a story where we've earned and deserve our fortune, and our separate small self remains center stage- it feels in control and justified."

Well, the book continues by introducing 3 friends that came to "sit shiva" with Job, meaning they grieved with him for 7 days. They sat quietly, not making any judgments or comments until after this Jewish ritual of sitting shiva. It is a helpful ritual, one we might learn from- to simply sit with those who grieve without trying to find the right words. Then after that time, they each made their assessment, sharing the traditional wisdom that Job must have sinned against God. That was the only explanation for his misfortune- Job offended God and now he was experiencing the consequences. This didn't sit well with Job. He defended himself over and over again, calling out for justice. Job's wife encouraged him to simply give up on God. His friends appealed to his senses and told him to confess and turn from evil. But Job continued his cries for 15 chapters claiming his innocence and desire for God to play fair. At one point, he asked God to forget about him and leave him alone. It was all too much pain, too much suffering.

In chapter 28, which we read this morning, Job gives this "hymn to wisdom" and he concluded that God is the source of all wisdom, saying,

Where then does wisdom come from? And where is the place of understanding?
23 "God understands the way to it, and he knows its place.

28 And he said to humankind,

'Truly, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom;

and to depart from evil is understanding.

He wasn't believing any of the wisdom tradition his friends were dishing

out. Finally, after Job had talked and complained, cried out for justice, and announced his understanding, God responded- but not how Job or anyone expected. God took Job on a tour of the cosmos. It is called the Whirlwind Speech, because God launched into a commentary on creation, inviting Job into the wonder of life, the beauty of the wild and uncontrollable world, and the wisdom of God in it all.

Recently, I had the opportunity to attend a week-long retreat on the prairie of southern Minnesota. The week was focused on learning from the prairie; gaining wisdom from God's creation from the smallest of things like a bumble bee or butterfly, to the expansiveness of the sky, to the plants growing in the field, to the sheep grazing on the hillside. God's creation has something to teach us- holy wisdom within it. And if we're willing to pay attention and spend some time in the wild places of the world, we might find ourselves turning our gaze away from our pain toward something more beautiful and even healing.

Strangely, God doesn't address the question of suffering. God didn't respond to Job's need for justice. What God did do is honor Job for speaking honestly and remaining present to their relationship. He honored Job for continuing to pray and talk to God even when he didn't get a response; even when he didn't understand; even when others fed him lies; even when the words he spoke were angry or irrational. In the end, Job is given a new life, and he responds with more generosity, joy, and wild love than he did before.

So what do we learn from Job? What wisdom can we gain from this thought experiment about suffering? I think, my friend Pete might have landed on something when he said, "Simply imagining that our life situation is primarily the result of luck [or a more spiritual word like grace] and not the result of our own moral superiority, frees us up and loosens our small egoic self, our world gets a little bigger- we are more likely to act from a place of compassion and abundance and creativity instead of fear and scarcity." It helps if we experience our lives simply as grace. I think that's what God showed Pete- that even his sister Carmen's life was grace. That's what God showed Job, a bigger world filled with abundance, filled with wild love. And perhaps, like Kathryn Schifferdecker taught in my seminary class on Job, we are being asked, "Can we love that which we can't control?" Can we love life with all its ups and downs and all its joy and sorrow? Can we see it all as grace even when things fall apart?

Here's the thing: our wisdom is different than God's wisdom. What makes sense to us isn't necessarily what makes sense to God. We tend to believe that the Divine should act according to our understanding rather than us shifting our thinking and widening our view. Now perhaps, we all need our 28 chapters of grief and lament before we have our eyes opened to the wild beauty of God's world. Perhaps, we all have to sink into the depths and consider some difficult truths before we can embrace the mystery of God. God unraveled the traditional wisdom of the day that maintained a transactional relationship with the Holy, shredding the ideology of Divine reward and punishment. What wisdom are you holding onto? What understanding is perhaps being challenged? Pay attention. Widen your vision. Lean in. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we are given the wisdom of God and we experience the gift of grace. 1 Corinthians 1:30 says, "God is why you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption." (NRSV) In other words, "Everything that we have—right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start—comes from God by way of Jesus Christ." (The Message) It's all grace. Life might not always feel like grace, with all its joy and especially its sadness, but maybe learning to receive it as such is a wisdom all its own.

Amen.