

October 4, 2009
Scarboro United Church
Calgary Alberta
Rev. J. Paul Mullen

“Wisdom From Broken Relationships”

Read: Job 1:1, 2:1-10
Psalm 26
Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12
Mark 10:2-16

We begin with Job, a play about how the prosperity gospel doesn't work!.

Are you familiar with the prosperity gospel? Remember when a lot of churches preached that if you believed in God and Jesus and did all the right things, you would get into heaven when you die even if you were in dire straits with little hope of your situation changing. That was the basic equation. If you are suffering now, have faith and you will be rewarded in heaven. Or, as some wags put it, there'll be pie in the sky when you die by and by.

Over the years this evolved into a more immediate reward. Have faith and don't do anything wrong and God will take care of you and all your problems will be solved for you. If your problems aren't solved, it is because you don't have enough faith or you have been sinning.

Apparently, though, being problem free isn't enough for some people. They want to have all the consumer goodies they desire and be wildly rich NOW! The prosperity gospel, the most recent incarnation of what I believe is a warped Gospel, assures them that if they have enough faith and behave themselves, God will deliver on demand. You can have it all, guaranteed! It takes a few different forms but that's the basic idea.

If you are wondering why those big box churches are full, part of the answer is that they preach the prosperity gospel. Say this prayer and Jesus will come into your heart with his delivery truck parked right outside. Heaven is unlimited consumer spending, and you can have it all now! Pray now, operators are standing by. Make a substantial donation in the next 20 minutes and your debt load will disappear!

Sound good???

There is just one little problem. You will have to go through the Bible and rip out the book of Job, and all those pesky prophets, and a bunch of the Psalms, and pretty much all of Jesus' teaching, and that very inconvenient death with all that icky suffering and stuff – who would want that anyway? You have to admit that the Bible will be considerably lighter without those 3000 verses that talk about the poor and how we are supposed to treat them.

Still sound good? I hope not.

The Book of Job was written in response to similar theology, countering the very prevalent belief back then as now - that good would be rewarded materially and sin would be punished by poverty– even to the seventh generation. The Book of Job, which originally was probably a play, says that life just doesn't work that way. It begins by setting up this narrative device of a dialogue between God and Satan. Satan, by the way, was not the incarnation of evil and ruler of hell that he became in the Middle Ages. In the Bible, Satan is the crown prosecutor in the cosmic court. Satan's name means the adversary.

The question that Satan brings to God is whether people are doing good because they love God or because they want a life filled with consumer goodies. Sound familiar?

Then the author imagines this experiment where Job loses pretty much everything and ends up in sackcloth and ashes, using a potsherd to scratch his sores. The play continues but you will have to come back over the next few weeks to hear more about it – or you can read the book!

When we turn to the story of Jesus and the Pharisees in Matthew, we again see some recurring dynamics as the story is played out again. Like Satan, the Pharisees come to Jesus with a challenging question and an ulterior motive. At the very least they want to dishonor Jesus by besting him in an honor challenge. Ideally they want to be rid of him completely.

To find the wisdom in this story and the play about Job, both of which speak to us of our broken relationships, is to find the wisdom we need to look at what was going on back then.

In the October issue of *The United Church Observer*, Neall Stevens of Red Deer writes (Letters: Preaching on the Past): “It seems [the United Church] wants to be known as a leader on the social issues of today, but when one sits in church, one gets a history lesson of what life was like 2000 years ago, and how the Scriptures relate to that time. . . Perhaps the Scriptures don’t apply to today and this is why United Church theological colleges tend to train people to dwell on the past.”

I wonder if what Mr. Stevens is saying is that it is much easier to abuse the Bible by taking passages out of context to prop up our current biases, stereotypes and fears than to get at what the passages meant in their historical context, and then struggling with the challenge in them for us today. In the past these words of Jesus about divorce have been ripped out of their context and used to pressure people into staying in unworkable marriages or to condemn and exclude those who endure a divorce in order to regain emotional, physical and spiritual health.

Part of the context is the beheading of John the Baptist, Jesus’ mentor, for condemning a divorce in Herod’s household. Are the Pharisees hoping Jesus’ response will have his head served on a platter?

In Jesus’ day marriage was not just between two individuals, it was a merger of two or more extended families to increase the honor of each. Whether the partners even knew each other or liked each other was irrelevant. Love didn’t enter the picture. Parents arranged marriages for the benefit of the whole family. Divorce broke this compact and dishonored not only the bride but her extended family and often led to feuding between the families.

The Pharisees come asking if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Jesus counters by pointing out the hardness of their hearts. In other words, he can see how divorced they are from God in all their plotting and manipulation. By quoting their own scripture to them Jesus steps out of their trap. They cannot go running to Herod to get Jesus in trouble. To do so they would have to say, not Jesus but the scriptures of their shared faith condemn Herod. It would be their heads served up before him.

When Jesus speaks of adultery it is not to condemn or chastise, but to explain his teaching. Remember too that Jesus also spoke of how to think about sex with someone else’s partner was the same as doing it. Who passes this test?

Just as the play about Job speaks of how wisdom comes from a healthy, non-manipulative relationship with God and God’s creation, Jesus’ encounter with the Pharisees speaks of how wisdom comes from healthy, non-manipulative relationships with each other. Jesus emphasizes the upside-down nature of both sources of wisdom when he speaks of entering the realm of God as a little child and later in the story when he blesses bread, breaks it and shares it with his companions.

And so we gather today at this table as companions – those who share bread together.

Amen