

October 25, 2009  
Scarboro United Church  
Calgary AB  
J. Paul Mullen

### **“Seeing Hope, Becoming Hope”**

In the story of Job which we have been sampling over the past few weeks, Job has been demanding an answer from God for his suffering. Job cries out from his deep hurt over the losses he experienced. His cry is a demand for an answer -- why me?

This is probably the most common prayer that is spoken in suffering. Job is not satisfied with the theology and platitudes his friends give him to explain away his suffering. He wants a face-to-face encounter with God. He wants to hear from God personally. He gets his face-to-face encounter. God does answer him. God's answer may sound cruel but it is deeply humbling. To Job's question, why me? God answers, why not you?

In the part of the story we read today Job realizes that all the wealth he had achieved and the children that he had were not given to him because he was so good, just as he had not lost his children and his wealth because he was so bad. Virtue has not been rewarded by wealth. It was not his sin that brought about his tragic loss. He realizes that this simple equation is wrong. This is not how God's world works. And that no matter how hard he tries, he is not capable of understanding why this world works the way it does. Yet his life goes on.

He still has the skills and abilities and the support of his extended family that enabled his success before his losses. More importantly, his attitude changes and he discovers true wealth. God's healing gives him a new, more humble vision of life and its abundance. One sign of his new vision is that instead of seeing his daughters as a liability, as was common in his time and place, he sees their beauty, honours their names and shares his inheritance with them -- an unheard of bequest. Job's vision has changed. He becomes more respectful and inclusive, a richness that far exceeds his material success.

Gautama Buddha was once asked if it was permissible to lie. In response he asks us to imagine a large house where a large group of children are playing in a room full of toys. Unknown to them a fire has started in another room and the whole house is about to be consumed. Discovering the fire you rush to the children and tell them they must leave, but they want to keep playing. You tell them they will die in the fire, but they do not believe you -- because it is not close enough yet to see or smell or feel. Desperate to get the children out you, get an idea. You say to them: "Look, if you come with me there are many more toys, toys made of gold that will last forever, they will never break and you can play with them day and night." The children are excited to hear of these marvelous toys and follow you out of the building. Once you are safely away from the burning building you ask them to turn and look. They see that you have saved them and are relieved and grateful. That, Buddha finished, is the only time it is acceptable to lie.

Traditional theology promises a heaven of abundance with streets paved with gold. You can make of that what you will. Progressive theology says that we simply don't know what the afterlife will be like -- other than that we will be with God and that is golden.

The prosperity gospel, on the other hand, teaches that what God wants for you is all the toys in the room and more of them. That all this alarmist talk about the house burning is a vicious liberal lie, and that true obedience means staying in the room and waiting for the promise of more toys to be fulfilled.

Bartimaeus sits in the hallway outside of the room full of toys. He is not allowed in because he is gay, or of another race, or speaks with a heavy accent, or wears strange clothes, or belongs to the wrong church, political party or gang. The others don't know how to relate to him and won't let him in. Every now and then one of the children inside remembers he is there and tosses out a broken toy for him to play with.

Then Jesus comes into the toy room and tells the children the house is on fire, but only a few will leave with him, even when he promises more and greater toys. As the danger increases he leads the few into the hallway where Bartimaeus calls to him. The children with him shy away. Jesus asks Bartimaeus what he wants. "I just want someone to play with." he answers. Jesus takes his hand and they all walk down the hallway and out of the burning building, where they all see clearly what is happening.

Then Jesus/Buddha/Mohammad/Atman turns and goes back into the building. The children, including Bartimaeus, watch him and realize he is going to try once more to get the others out. They look at each other in amazement and horror. Then one by one they turn and follow him on his way.

The wisdom of this world tells us that there is only one value in life, the maximization of profit. God's wisdom calls us to realize the maximal value of the prophetic!

The wisdom of this world tells us that if government takes care of big business, big business will take care of us. God's wisdom calls us to take care of each other, including the lost and the least, our servants, government and big business.

The wisdom of this world tells us how to get ahead, how to become financially independent and secure, how to climb to the top of the heap where you can have it and control it all. The wisdom of God turns all of this upside down, backwards and inside out.

The wisdom of the world tells us that our money is precious and we should cling to every loonie. The wisdom of God tells us that in this transitory world clinging to anything is looney.

The wisdom of the world tells us that we should wait until we have bought everything we think we need and want, then, if anything is left over, we can painlessly give some of the remnant to the church or charities. The wisdom of God says you will never have everything you think you need or want so you may as well give generously off the top and live as well as you can on the rest. The wisdom of God also says that if your giving muscles hurt when you give, then you need to exercise them more. Soon they will stop hurting and feel good. Keep at it and they will feel great! Exercising your gratitude and generosity muscles is the sure cure for the spiritual lethargy of a flabby soul.

Following worship today we have our annual Stewardship Luncheon. I hope it serves as a reminder for you that this is your church. It does the work that you approve at each Annual Meeting or that comes to the Board that you elect to act on your behalf. It is not wise to hamper them with deficits. It is not wise to stint on the upkeep of this building that you love so much. In this most affluent of provinces we have hungry children and homeless teens and adults . . . you know, if you want to understand what God thinks is an abomination don't quit reading the Bible at the Book of Leviticus! Read on until you get the great prophets of old: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and Joel to name but a few.

Even good old Habakkuk . . . if you can find him. When we tolerate child poverty and homeless teens and adults, when we cut back on education and health care to subsidize some of the most powerful corporations the world has ever known, then **we** are the abomination! It is not enough to toss a broken toy into the hallway for Bartimaeus.

So if we as a province and country are not willing to use our precious tax dollars to help the poorest of the poor, then the only option is to be as generous as possible with the groups who are. And may we as a congregation always be among the willing generous.

The wisdom of the world says we are entitled to have it all. The wisdom of God says that the world and all its wisdom is on fire and it is all smoke and mirrors.

The wisdom of the world says that its problems are hopeless so you may as well get as much as you can. The wisdom of God says to each of us, "you are my hope, there is no plan B."

The wisdom of the world says "Why me?" The wisdom of God says, "Why not you?"

The wisdom of this world says we should keep our eyes on the prize. The wisdom of God looks compassionately from the cross on a burning world and says, "Forgive them, for they cannot see."

Amen