

Reflection for Sept. 28, 2020

Monday of the 26th week in Ordinary Time

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Job 1: 6-22

Psalm 17

Luke 9: 46-50

The description of suffering horror after horror in these beginning chapters of the book of Job is frighteningly familiar to us during these most sobering days.

It was tempting to leave aside this first reading and to focus instead on the innocence of children, Jesus' tender embrace and the teaching of today's Gospel.

Both are real. Both are vivid pictures of life.

Yet the suffering – and the reality of innocence and suffering side by side – commands our attention. In fact, it is front and center of our consciousness and we are acutely aware of our vulnerability. We are Job as we struggle to understand and cope with the realities of our world suffering. We are this child sustaining our faith and belief in God who is somehow in the midst of our lives.

The main question of Job in this entire book is: Is there a universal experience of injustice that makes a good person suffer?

Over these next days in the liturgical cycle we will continue to hear Job's story. His feelings and his lashing out in revolt will alternate with surrender to mystery. His condition of misery and turmoil will alternate with submission. His tortured body and soul are at times argumentative and then reduced to silence.

We know these ways.

All we need to do is look at our lives and feel again the pain of loss, grief, illness or deep regret. Because we know and feel we are also moved by Job's suffering and we have empathy for his searching question.

There are two things that help me during these uncertain times when God does seem more distant – when life is hard. Two things that help my patience not to grow thin or to simply take on the look of resignation and sadness.

They are: reading and community

I read to know I am not alone.

Community: the same.

Reading stories comforts me, helps me to find myself and gives words to my feelings and experience of life. I am stirred within in the encounter of people, life situations, and complexities of the heart in a well-written book.

There is power in stories that reach me and moves me. I am even converted in ways that transcend my limitations and weakness. Reading offers me insight and grace and most of all empathy.

I offer a few examples that revolve around Job's question and maybe our own.

In the writings of Elie Wiesel, survivor of the Holocaust, a companion in the barracks bitterly asked him when they were forced to watch an execution: "Where is your God now?" Wiesel simply said: "In that man – our brother."

In the diary of Anne Morrow Lindberg, *Hour of Gold, Hour of Lead*, a reader questioned that she published the story of the horror of her child's kidnapping and murder as exposing a most personal suffering. She said: "Suffering is always individual – perhaps the most individualizing thing on earth. But it is also a great common bond. It is universal." She goes on: "There are even certain familiar stages in suffering-steps in coming to terms with it. We may feel alone – painfully so – -but we are not alone. We recognize in ourselves and others, pain, grief, loneliness. Then we see – we mourn with understanding, patience love, openness."

In the novel: *The Heart of the Family*, there is a conversation between two men whose countries had been at war. The one was an Air controller bomber destroying the cities of the enemy. The other was the lone survivor of his family when his home was obliterated by the bomb. When they revealed their identities to each other and knew that the one directly caused the pain and loss of the other, they both suffered. There was a long silence. It was filled with the forces of good and evil, hate and love, innocence and guilt.

Then the one said to the other: "We can reach a world consciousness in this suffering we know so deeply. Paradoxically it is what makes it possible to go on because we are linked together in this pain. It is the road to liberation."

We read to know we are not alone. Community-the same.

In the memoirs of Corrie Ten Boom, a Christian who was imprisoned for hiding her Jewish neighbors, she writes: "We can never learn that Christ is all we need, until Christ is all we have."

The pattern of Jesus' earthly life is the story of Job. Life, Death, and Resurrection repeats itself in every person and in the depths of our own hearts even as its lessons are taught in nature. It is precisely here that the universal common bond connects and holds us in community and ultimately towards liberation.

In the novel, *This Tender Land*, 12-year-old Odie looks upon the grave of an unnamed Indian boy.

“This kid,” he says “was just like us. He loved the sun on his face, the dew on the morning grass, the song of the birds in the trees. He loved to skip stones on the river. At night he liked to lie on the sand and stare up at the stars and dream. Just like us. He had people who loved him but one day he went away and never came back, and they were heartbroken. They vowed not to speak his name again until the day he returned. That day never came. But every night his mother stood on the riverbank and called his name, and if you listen close at night you can still hear the wind over the river whisper that name so he will never be forgotten.”

We are not forgotten. We are bonded to Job; to each other; to all; because we are bonded in Christ.

How can that be? In the power of the Gospel today we hear: “Whoever receives this child in my name receives me.”