

Sermon 9/7/25 - Ecclesiastes 3:1-8; Sirach 2:7-11, 15-17; Job 2:11-13

After I graduated college, I went on a 9-week backpacking trip to Europe. It was the whole college student deal - Eurail pass, hostels, camping. Upon return, I would be moving to California to start seminary. Though I'd grown up in the church, I'd never spent time with the Bible outside of Sunday School and confirmation class, so I bought this Bible to take with me – paperpack, so flexible in the backpack; and “words of Jesus in red,” to make my comprehension a little more focused.

I immediately realized that reading the bible is not like reading a novel for pleasure. Plodding through the early books, I felt discouraged, like I'd never make sense of it all. So I figured I should just concentrate on really grasping one book. Having perceived myself as an impatient person, the colloquial phrase “patience of Job” intrigued me, so I figured, I'll read *that* book and see if I can learn why Job needed to be patient and how he was patient.

I know I've said this before but I take issue with the premise of the book - a bet between god and the devil. It portrays a god I don't like, one seemingly cavalier with the life of a human. Job's patience was more *perseverance* – it's not like he sat around passively while his entire life was destroyed. He complained to God, who basically smacked him down, saying “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” – basically, who the heck are you to question me??? That's not the kind of loving and compassionate God Jesus demonstrated for us.

So, critique aside, I do want to point out an incredibly valuable message in the book. Hear again this passage from Job 2:11-13

11 Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. **12** When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. **13** They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

In that moment, Job's friends joined him in his mourning. Knowing there was nothing they could say that would change the situation, they remained silent and sat with him for 7 days and nights, an act of empathy.

The practice of sitting silently for seven days and nights – found both in Genesis 50, following the death of Jacob, as well as in this passage in Job, serves as the biblical inspiration for the modern Jewish mourning ritual known as “sitting shiva.” In both the story and the ritual, the extended silence is a profound expression of grief, recognizing that words are insufficient to comfort someone experiencing overwhelming suffering.

Returning to Job, we find that a couple of chapters later, after this time of empathy, Job's friends start in on him. They criticize and accuse, saying Job **MUST** have offended God to be experiencing all this destruction; he must have committed some kinds of unpardonable sins. In common parlance, this is called "blaming the victim." They do this for 19 chapters!!!!!! So Job, devastated, is getting smacked down by God AND his friends! Ultimately they get called on their bad behavior by cameo-appearing Elihu; and all go silent again, realizing Job is blameless.

We've probably all heard some variation of blaming the victim. From assault to illness, we've heard it. "Shouldn't have been in that neighborhood." or "What was she wearing?" Someone becomes ill and we scrutinize: did they eat right? Exercise enough? Geez, they should have stopped drinking/smoking/ eating at McDonald's!

But there is a more subtle form of blaming the victim, and it is often disguised in the form of someone attempting to be "helpful." This form of blaming the victim is called "offering unsolicited advice."

When I became ill, I heard a lot of this. It sounded like, "Yoga will help. You need to go gluten free. You should reduce your stress. Have you tried this....tea, tincture, diet plan, meditation style...." You get the picture.

As someone who lives in my body (me!) it was difficult to hear advice from people who were aware only of a small piece of my story, and who did not live in my body. I understood that people wanted to be helpful, but in sharing what THEY found helpful, there was an implied critique – if you don't do what I'm suggesting, then I'm washing my hands of your fate, it's your own fault. Harsh, right? I appreciated most the friends who sat silently, who offered a meal, who ran errands when I couldn't.

One of the most challenging adjustments for me was dealing with new limitations. It was incredibly challenging to have "the patience of Job;" in fact, I was definitely more like the raging-at-God Job. Ultimately I made some degree of peace with my new reality, which is genuinely reflective of the famous passage from Ecclesiastes we heard this morning - as well as countless times we've heard it since the Byrds turned it into a song in 1965. Like it or not, there is a time and a season for all of life's experiences, the good and the bad. It is our existential reality. Ecclesiastes poetically illustrates the universal intent toward balance.

Notice, this passage does not encourage us to passivity. It encourages us to celebrate as well as mourn, to act as well as to be still – a time to keep silent, and a time to speak.

Imagine ourselves faced with situations like Job's. Hopefully not as extreme, but when we consider what's happening in Gaza, in the Ukraine, in Sudan, in Afghanistan, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, we are aware that in fact, many are experiencing the

devastating losses Job experienced. What is our response? When it's political, we know not to "blame the victim." It's a time to build up; a time to mourn, a time to speak, a time to love by acting in the spirit of Jesus' love; and a time to hate the conditions that have caused these devastations.

When it's personal, we need to know what's actually helpful...and what's not. Sirach tells us that God is compassionate and merciful, and saves in the time of distress. That doesn't mean the horrors will stop, unfortunately. It does mean, though, that we are not alone in our suffering, that God is with us. We experience this presence through compassion and mercy from the care of loved ones around us. Sitting shiva, or sitting silently with one who is grieving or in a vulnerable state, is an act of being present in another person's pain. It's not about talking someone out of their feelings or attempting to interrupt their process with spiritual platitudes so you feel more comfortable, less connected to the pain. It's not about you trying to fix things. It's, frankly, not about you at all. To sit silently with someone in deep grief is extremely difficult. It is painful. No wonder why we try to extricate ourselves with words, to distance ourselves from the pain with explanations.

When someone we love is experiencing difficulties beyond our imagining, here are the things we can and should do – this is advice culled from therapists, rabbis, and pastors:

- Say I love you
- Be a good listener
- Say, "I'm always thinking about you"
- Help without being asked
- Recall pleasant memories
- It's okay to feel scared. It's okay to say, "I wonder whether there's something you want to talk about?" and equally okay if they decline – then we sit with the person in silence, holding them in our hearts and lifting them up to the comfort of the Spirit.

Then there are the things not to do. For some scriptural guidance – read the book of Job! Don't do what his friends did! Read those 19 chapters of Job's friends' criticisms! And avoid the following (these come from a therapist who was dealing with cancer):

- Don't say "I feel so sorry for you" Do say: "I so wish you didn't have to go through this."
- Don't be toxically optimistic by saying things like, "If anyone can beat this, it's you."
- Don't say, "Let me know the results" or ask for information about the person's medical procedures. Oddly, one doesn't particularly want to feel obliged to hit the social networks the moment one returns from long, complicated, stressful and invasive tests, which ultimately delivered news you simply didn't want to hear. If people do want to talk about such matters, they really need to be allowed some control over when, how and to whom.
- This next one is likely to be a learning curve for many: don't say, "What can I do to help?"

- That doesn't mean that help should not be offered. But "Can I pick your mail...pharmacy order...groceries?" or "Can I come round with some soup and clean your kitchen after?" are options greatly preferable to saddling a vulnerable person with the further responsibility of thinking up a task for you.
- Don't assume that visits are welcome. Don't belabor the details of your own busy schedule in order to fit visiting into it. Call and check; if you don't get a response it clearly means that no one is available to welcome you in that moment. Pray. Wait for a return call, email or text. Send a card.
- Finally, don't take someone's illness or other challenging situation as an opportunity to personalize the situation by saying something like "I'm so terribly upset about your condition." That puts the vulnerable person in the position of having to console you, rather than to be consoled by you. Instead, emphasize how much you love the person and how valuable they are in your life.

Theologian Henri Nouwen said, "When we honestly ask ourselves which persons in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not-knowing, not-curing, not-healing, and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is the friend who cares."

Attorney and justice rights advocate Bryan Stevenson offers this reflection:

Our brokenness is also the source of our common humanity, the basis for our shared search for comfort, meaning, and healing. Our shared vulnerability and imperfection nurtures and sustains our capacity for compassion.

Sirach asks, "has anyone called upon God and been neglected?" My answer is, not here at Guilford Community Church. We are all bearers of God's mercy. Amen.