

Sunday, October 25, 2009
The Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon The Very Rev. Bill Lupfer

The Gospel reading about Bartimaeus is beautiful, and the way Val reads it is just exquisite. But I'm still with Job. I'm still with Job. Remember last week, we had a reading from Job as well; this is actually connected to it, very closely. So...the sermon from last week was Part I, this is going to be Part II, and Scripture is forcing me to do this.

Let's go back to last week. You remember the story of Job, this man who is incredibly resourced, and beloved by all--including God. And then God and Satan, in Heaven, get into an argument about the true nature of human beings. And God uses Job as an example of how wonderful humans are, and Satan says: "Eh, it's only because he is rich. Take away everything, and Job will turn on you like everyone else." So God takes the bet. This is true...this is in the Bible...go read it...it's fabulous, I love it! So God takes the bet, and says "Sure...just don't kill him," He says. OK...so Satan goes after Job, takes everything within short notice. Job loses it all. And most of the Book of Job, is bad advice from his friends. We've all lived with that, haven't we? You have a setback, and your friends come in and give you free advice that's horrible. So most of Job is really bad advice that his friends are giving him. And Job keeps saying: "NO! I want to talk to God! I want to hear from God!"

And so...God says "OK," and we heard it last week--God says "Where were you when I created the heavens and earth?" And then He goes on, and God reveals to Job, the incredible splendor of God's creation. And Job realizes yet again, his proper place. His place is in adoration of God, opening his heart to God's blessings--come what may. And Job had this understanding that he was created in that incredible, expansive image of God. So this week, we hear Job's reply. And we see it, right? Job says: "Whoa...no..I had always heard about all this stuff about you, God, but now I see it. Now my relationship with you is real...and tangible...I can see and touch." And then, once Job opens into that understanding of God, then Job understands the blessings, and they come again. Although - I'm not sure 1000 donkeys is a great blessing, but donkeys were like tractors back then--it just means he had a lot. And so we have a rhythm of the spiritual life, revealed to us through Job. This incredible expansiveness that comes to us, when we are really awake to God's glory. And then the desire to turn and re-orient ourselves. That's what repentance means today...turn and re-orient ourselves, and count God's blessings again.

Right now, we're in the middle of our Annual Giving Campaign, and our theme is Counting Your Blessings. So, I've been pounding away up here, as have others, with you, to count your blessings. To become like Job...whatever happens...count your blessings. And last week I made a confession that I was really working with you, a little too much on external blessings...like the 1000 donkeys...or whatever you have to count. And we came to a point in our self-understanding together, that sometimes we have a hard time counting our blessings. Sometimes we have a hard time, even seeing the blessings.

So I shared with you a prayer practice, called the Prayer of Lovingkindness. And I want to extend that practice with you a bit more today. This is a practice that you would use as a tool when you need it. So don't use it when you don't need it. Some people say that if your only tool is a hammer, then everything starts to look like a nail...have you heard that one? This is a tool. You look at the job. You go to your toolkit. When you need this one, pull it out.

The practice of lovingkindness goes like this. You start where Job started...you can't see your blessings...everything has crumbled in on you. And then, somehow through a sort of Herculean spiritual grace, even in that place of difficulty...you open your heart. And you go to that place that Job went with God..."Where were you when I created the heavens and the earth?" And rather than being obsessed on your own troubles again, you go "oh...yes...God is God, and I am not. And I can revel in the glory of God." Its a spiritual "push" that we have to do when we're in that place. But when we get there, that's the first step of this practice of lovingkindness, sort of "muscling it" in our hearts and saying: "Even in the trouble now, I see that God is glorious." And then right after that happens, the next day...just to let whatever it is in that's bothering you. It's usually someone else, right? It's so easy to focus on others, as our problem. So you're focused on someone else as that thing that's getting in your way, and in front of your bliss. So rather than push them further away, the practice of lovingkindness says you would embrace that difficulty. Imagine big blue sky, with God, and God opens your heart completely. Then you have the capacity to let this little nagging problem in, and you breathe that in. You breathe out God's expansiveness. You breath in what is troubling you. And then you turn toward whatever it is, in this practice of lovingkindness,...the third step is to turn toward whatever it is that is bothering you.

This week I had someone who was functioning at a pretty low level, that really wasn't their best. And they were annoying me. So I was trying to speak the truth in love to them, because it's helpful when folks to do it for me, when I'm in that place...and help this person lift themselves a bit. So the practice of lovingkindness, would have me claim God's grace...and then invite this person in, in a prayerful, imaginative way, into my heart,...and the stubbornness that I was experiencing. And then breathe out in that prayer...breathe out courage and grace to that person...so that they could go deeper in their own heart, and mature in their own heart. And then breathe in their stubbornness, and their fear...and then breathe out God's loving grace...God's commitment to always be with that person. And then to expand the practice: to breathe in the fears that everyone in that kind of emotional state has...go global...breathe in that fear and that stubbornness. And then breathe out, for all the folks on this planet, that are suffering from that difficulty. Breathe in their fear...breathe out that healing breath...becoming God's breath...to others. The practice of lovingkindness is a prayer tool. When we struggle to count our blessings...because our sights are dimmed by trouble and difficulty. It's a prayer tool to open our hearts back up, like Job opened his heart through an encounter with the living God. It's a prayer discipline and tool that allows us to become a blessing, and go out to others...rather than simply worrying about our blessings. Become a blessing to other people.

Now, as we've been pounding away on this Counting Our Blessings, one among us decided to become a blessing. And what she did...was say "I'm going to contact the people who are blessings for me. And I'm going to thank them." So she did it by e-mail. And Marti...I saw you earlier...Marti Anderson...I think she's in back, as an usher. Marti Anderson decided to e-mail people that were on her blessing list. So one week, I was waiting to do a pastoral visit, and someone walked by, who said: "Hey! I just got an e-mail! Marti Anderson just e-mailed me, and said I'm one of her blessings!" Do you know the look on that person's face? Do you know how she carried herself...full...how deeply she was breathing? Do you know what it's like, when someone reaches out to you, and says: "You're the blessing!" When they're not so worried about themselves anymore, but they are actually beholding you. That's what the practice of lovingkindness allows in each one of us. And that's the way it becomes a tool for us, to be part of the transforming of this world.

So I pray, and hope, in this season of life, when we are counting our blessings...that you count yourself as a blessing...and that as you do that, you release yourself into this world...to distribute that blessing, and offer that blessing to others.