

Rev. Dr. Gary Shahinian  
Sermon  
October 4, 2009  
Park Congregational Church  
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Those Who Are Good for Nothing”

Scripture Text: Job 1:1, 2:1-10

Dear people of God, a Jewish student who converted to Christianity at the Bible College I attended told me about his first experience with the Lord’s Supper. He was very excited about participating in the meal for the first time as he was a new convert to the faith and never before witnessed the celebration of Holy Communion. They passed around the bread first and the student watched everyone take just one little piece of bread from the tray, and so, he did the same. Then they passed around the grape juice, and again, the student watched as everyone took just one little cup of juice, and so, again, he did the same. Then he heard the pastor giving thanks for the sacred meal, and he realized that the supper was finished. And so, he whispered to his Christian friend next to him, “That was the whole supper? And you folks call us Jews stingy.”

We can laugh at this disappointment of the Jewish student at his first Lord’s Supper, but for many of our brothers and sisters around the globe, not only does the Lord’s Supper consist of these scanty morsels, but many of their regular meals do so as well. On this World Communion Sunday, we come to the Lord’s Table with a global consciousness. The bread and grape juice remind us that Christ suffered and died for the sins of the whole world. This feast of spiritual nourishment is especially meaningful for those who suffer from disease, hunger, or economic deprivation, for those who like Job believe that life has been unfair to them.

Mother Teresa was once asked to describe the difference between her work and the labors of a social worker. Her brief answer was that her work is sacramental. By that she meant that Christ is present among the lives of the poor, deprived, and hungry. Christ is present among the least of us. The broken bread is for broken and bruised lives, the poor in spirit. Through the sacrament, everyone, but especially the poor, is reminded of the continuous contact they have with Christ. Jesus is present in the bread and grape juice, not literally the way Roman Catholics believe, but spiritually among all of us, those who are nourished by the sacrament. Mother Teresa was able to see Jesus in the slums where she worked. She was able to see his broken body in the lives of the children who daily begged for food and slept in the gutters of the streets. She saw Christ in these pitiful people and when she touched them, she believed that she was touching Christ.

Do we ever interpret the sacrament of Holy Communion in this way? When we come to the Lord's Table today, on World Communion Sunday, do we feel near us both the presence of Jesus Christ and the poor of this unjust, sinful world? When we participate in this holy meal, do we realize that we are commemorating our Lord's suffering and his solidarity with those for whom life is unfair?

There are 6.8 billion people in the world today. If we shrunk the whole world to a global village of 1000 persons, only 164 would have adequate food, shelter, and economic security. Everyone in this chapel would be among those 164. The other 836 would live in varying degrees of poverty, disease, and political, social, and economic oppression. Are we aware of these facts this morning as we anticipate celebrating Holy Communion? Do we come with a global consciousness that much in the world is unfair, that many of those who are poor in other countries, especially women, work hard and have little to show for it. Are we aware that most of the poor people in the world work harder and longer than any of us and still live in economic squalor? Do we

realize that as of last year for the first time in human history, the majority of the earth's residents lived in cities, and that this pace will accelerate in coming years so that by the year 2030, 5,000,000,000 people will be urban dwellers, more than 80% of them in developing countries, and the majority of them living in poverty?

Here we are today on this bright October morning gathered as disciples of Jesus Christ professing that he is indeed the hope of the hopeless. The one who initiated the sacrament of Holy Communion is here among us showing us his suffering love. His redemptive power is saving this unfair world in which the wicked prosper and the innocent suffer. Do we see this? Or do we think that the world is basically fair and that people pretty much get what they deserve?

If you believe that life is basically just, then you are not very perceptive. If your theology does not allow for unfairness in the scheme of things, then you need to read some of the Wisdom literature of the Bible, especially the Book of Job. The ancient Israelites had to undergo a change in their own theology after they were driven away from their homeland and marched to Babylon as captives in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. It was during the Babylonian exile that the Hebrew people began to question the assumption that God is always fair. The Deuteronomic formula, namely, that we are rewarded for doing good and punished for doing evil, had broken down. A full generation of faithful Jewish followers of God's commandments had been born as slaves in a pagan land. They suffered humiliation, persecution, and oppression, and yet they were innocent of any wrongdoing. This is why the Book of Job was written.

The dramatic dialogue of Job was written to express the anguish of the innocent. The figure of Job represents every suffering Jew of that day. He dwells in the land of Uz, a land where biblical scholars disagree as to its exact location. Perhaps, then, we should view Job as the universal person. There is a portion of everyone's fate that follows along the lines of Job. Sooner or later, all of us will

question God's fairness, as did Job. In this story, Job's perfectly sublime existence is interrupted by tragedy. He had been a man of tremendous blessings: a devoted wife, ten children, much wealth, good health. And he always brought the required burnt offerings to God in appreciation.

But one day the heavenly beings in the court of Yahweh observe Job's righteousness. One of the angels, called in Hebrew theology, Satan, meaning literally "the Accuser," tells God that the only reason Job is righteous is because he expects to be rewarded. In other words, what Satan is saying is that Job has no integrity. He's a big phony. And so, Satan suggests that if God were to take away his blessings, Job would curse God. God, therefore, challenges Satan to a wager. You see, God believes in Job. God believes that even if his children, wealth, health, and the support of his wife were taken away, Job would still remain faithful. And we know at the end that God wins the wager.

But we should notice that nowhere in the Book of Job does the writer raise the question, "Is life fair?" The Jewish people of that day knew that life was not fair. What anguished them even more than life not being fair was the question, "What is the meaning of faith in such an unfair world?" The amazing story of Job addresses this question with profundity that is timeless. The dialogue of Job is not a drama about the patience of Job, as is often heard. Job is anything but patient. He constantly rages against his plight. He argues with others who try to defend the justice of God. And even though at the end of the book, Job has everything restored to him twofold, I wonder if someone were to ask him if it were all worthwhile, if he would have answered, "Yes." After all, though he was given ten more children, he still never got his original ten children back again. How many of you parents would feel that justice was fulfilled if after losing ten of your children, you were given ten more to replace them?

No, the story of Job assumes that life is not fair. But what is often overlooked in the story is that it's not really so much about Job's faith in God, but rather, about God's faith in Job. God needs to know why Job believes in God. For you see, if Satan is correct and Job believes in God only for what Job gets from God, then Job is the biggest hypocrite around. Far from being a righteous person, Job instead would be the worst of sinners because he pretends to love God, but he really only loves God's blessings. Not only is Job's integrity at stake in this story, but so is God's redemption. For if Satan is right, then God is unloved and merely used by humans. The entire creation then would be unredeemable.

The real heroes of the faith, whether in the Bible or in church history, are those who are like Job, those who know that life is unfair, and yet trust in God anyway. People like Jeremiah, who buys real estate in Judah just at the time the Babylonian armies confiscate the land. People like the apostle Paul, who preached about the whole creation being transformed in Christ as Nero was crucifying Christians and feeding them to the lions in huge numbers. People like Dietrich Bonhoeffer who on the day of his execution by the Nazis knelt on the prison floor and prayed fervently so that a concentration camp doctor testified that "In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."<sup>1</sup>

God is not fair. But maybe God gives us something more important than fairness. God gives us the ability to be good for nothing, to be good because being good is the right thing to be, not expecting any reward for it. God comes to us in the form of suffering love. God defined that love by having his only begotten son go to the

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<sup>1</sup>Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 831.

cross. And God places bets on us that if we show suffering love in our lives, then we too will experience victory over evil and know that our suffering is never in vain.

Our real hero of course must be the one who cried out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34) and then uttered a prayer he learned in childhood at bedtime, not “Now I lay me down to sleep,” but instead, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Amen.