

## **What's Bugging Job's Wife?**

**Job 1 and 2 (Sel.)**

**Fourth Sunday of Easter-April 13, 2008**

The Old Testament parable of Job grapples with why pain, anguish and affliction are allowed by God to be a part of human life.

The plot of the parable centers around Job, a successful, confident, respected, hard-working good man, who suddenly loses everything: his business, his assets, his children, and his health. Over a very short period of time, he is stripped of security, comfort, well-being – all of the common sources of self-esteem and optimism.

With all of that now gone, the teller of the parable, asks, in effect, “Who Job is NOW?” Does anything of substance remain in what has now become this pain wracked, frustrated, bewildered man?

According to the story, though, despite his misfortunes, he is still quite intact. It says, “After all of these misfortunes, Job got to his feet, ripped his robe, shaved his head, then fell to the ground and worshiped: Naked I came from my mother’s womb, naked I’ll return to the womb of the earth. God gives, God takes, God’s name be ever blessed.” ...His wife said, “Still holding on to your precious integrity, are you? Curse God and be done with it!” He told her, “You’re talking like an empty-headed fool. We take the good days from God – why not also the bad days?”

What Job said there was certainly commendable. But there is a side to me that understands his wife’s reaction too. She is clearly suspicious and irritated at Job’s outlook. She believes that he’s not being honest with himself or with her, or at best, that he’s in serious denial. “Come off it, Job. Don’t pour that religious syrup on what’s just happened to us. Our KIDS are DEAD, for God’s sake. Your health is gone. We’re bankrupt. Please spare me the tripe about our still having “nice memories,” or about trying to be grateful for what once was, or about how this eventually will all work out for the best. Job, at least be honest enough – man enough, to curse the God who punishes and destroys you completely unjustly.”

The story makes it clear, though, that Job isn’t in denial. Despite his having been extraordinarily fortunate throughout his life (until recently), Job has never lost track of the real terms and conditions under which he, and all of us human beings, hold our lives. He hits it squarely when he says, in effect, “We bring nothing into this world and we aren’t allowed to take anything with us when we leave it. While here, we encounter both pain and joy, and are called to embrace and work with both. Only a fool believes himself entitled to the one without the other.”

That, in a nutshell, is the difference between Job and Job's wife. Even so, it's Job's wife who I understand best. There is no indication that she had been a bad or ungrateful person. Had she been, Job wouldn't have married her. Certainly she appreciated the blessings of life as much or more than most. She had been thankful for all of the good things that had previously been a part of their life and marriage, had probably even taught their children to appreciate the many benefits amidst which they, the children, had grown up. But "reactive gratitude" really isn't adequate. Our dogs and cats undoubtedly have a kind of thankfulness for being brought in on a sub-zero night, or in finding their food bowls filled.

The difference between the thankfulness of Mrs. Job and that of her husband, was that along the way in her living, a sense of entitlement had crept in, probably unnoticed. (That happens, very, very easily.) All of the good things that had come their way had long since ceased to be seen as blessings — as examples of God's grace. She wouldn't have admitted it — people seldom do — but the lifestyle, their children's lives, their comfortable home, their good health, their financial security, their wonderful circle of friends, all became an entitlement. That all felt like no more than what was supposed to be there for hardworking, prudent, self-disciplined, reverent people such as were they. To have that now taken away, was then a robbery, of cosmic proportion. She was entitled not to have this happen.

And THAT, right there -- the transposing of the gifts and graces in our lives, as being one's rights, owed to us or owned by us -- is the "myth of entitlement." It is a profoundly distorting thing, one to which no one is immune, AND, to which, the more fortunate a person is, the more susceptible he becomes.

When they put together the list of the Seven Deadly Sins, had they asked me (which they didn't) there would have been eight deadly sins. This sense of "entitlement" would have been right up there with gluttony, envy, greed and all the rest. Like some of the others, it is predominantly a self-punishing sin. That's so because it sets a person up (as it clearly did, Mrs. Job) for times of rage and disillusionment, for believing that one is being abused by God, and humiliated in front of the whole world.

One irony about it, is how easily we criticize, often harshly, entitlement-thinking, when it shows up in the indigent, is evident in some of society's drop-outs, or those who for good, or for not-so-good reasons, become dependent upon the human services system. Though that claim of entitlement isn't quite the same, still, in terms of the assumptions about how things ought to work, there is very little difference from that which infects the thinking of some of the most fortunate, richly blessed of human beings.

That's why we should be cautious about villainizing Mrs. Job. She's one of us; maybe she IS us. Feelings of being entitled aren't limited only to believing that one has a right to his wealth and security. Mrs. Job is, one could say, the patron saint of everyone who has come to assume, for example THAT because he eats wisely, exercises and gets regular physicals, surely that entitled him to a minimum of 70-some years of good health, maybe more.

THAT because she has worked hard all of her life, OF COURSE that earns her a comfortable, easy retirement; THAT having made truly major sacrifices for their children, entitled them to those children's later attentiveness, veneration and deference; THAT having always lived an ethical, respectable, disciplined life they are certainly entitled to whatever feelings of disgust, disdain and aggravation toward anyone who has not done so; THAT his having been quite generous – having contributed liberally, entitles him to major recognition for having done so –maybe even a measure of control; THAT living in this day and age of advanced technology, you and I are now entitled not to endure bad outcomes in health care, breakdowns in the systems on which we depend, or most other errors, delays and accidents; THAT as a responsible citizen and tax-payer of a great nation, I am entitled to be free of anxiety over becoming the victim of terrorists.

Most of us are too sophisticated to come right out and declare that we're entitled in such ways, but that deadly ilk of such assumptions, does manage, quietly to lodge itself in the back of the minds of many of us. There may be no sign of it until, what were assumed to be entitlements, are suddenly removed. At that point, though, as with Mrs. Job, it can turn what was bad enough as a misfortune, into total spiritual disorientation, disintegration and embitterment. That's why Mrs. Job couldn't make head or tail of her husband saying, "God owes us nothing. Everything that we've lost was only there by sheer Grace. Every bit of it was blessings of timing, of birth, of opportunity, and of chemistry. Call it, at least in this country, white privilege.

NO! Not for her. For Mrs. Job it was nothing less than having been robbed and tortured by Almighty God.

Job then, we sense, is going to make it as a while person. Whether she will is far from clear. Pain in life, such as was there for both of them with their losses, is an inevitable part of living. But "suffering" in the sense that she was suffering, is optional.

A true story that might give some feeling for this is that of Amos Fortune, a black man who lived in the mid 1800's. He had been a slave, but had managed to purchase his freedom. Shortly after the end of the Civil War, Amos settled in the little town of Jaffrey, New

Hampshire. He became a successful tanner. He worked hard and provided well for his family, accumulating some modest savings.

To a very limited extent the town of Jaffrey accepted him and his family. They, for example, allowed his daughter to attend the public school. As a black child in that all-white setting, she was, though, constantly subjected to humiliating treatment – not only by the other children, but also by teachers. This misery inflicted on his little girl, was most agonizing and heartbreaking for Amos, but he somehow maintained a workable perspective on it. He regularly attended the local Congregational Church. The church was willing to have him attend, but he wasn't to mix with the rest of the congregation. They segmented off a portion of the balcony where they required him to sit by himself. Though he attended their communion services, he wasn't allowed to receive communion. As far as they were concerned, he was there as an observer. Despite such flagrantly unchristian treatment, Amos seemed to take no offense. He quietly came and went. His faith and his stability of spirit kept him a solid, upbeat, loving person, always a productive and caring part of the community.

Hearing the story thus far, it seems, doesn't it, that there's bound to be some happy moment when the people of Jaffrey – of that church in particular -- saw the error of their ways, the evil of their bigotry, and recognized Amos' goodness and patience. Not so. The church and the town continued their isolating and marginalizing of him and his family, till his death. When he died, Amos left the largest part of his savings to a local school district in which his daughter had suffered so much humiliation. There was ALSO a bequest to the Congregational Church, designated for the purchase of a silver communion set, though to his dying day, Amos was never allowed to be more than an observer to their communion services.

But even when those bequests were made known, there was STILL no recognition or remorse. The townsfolk presumably told themselves that his gifts were perfectly appropriate. "He ought to be thankful he wasn't still a slave, right?" "He ought to be grateful that we even let his daughter attend our schools, right?" "He ought to be honored to have been allowed to watch the communion services from his balcony perch." It was well over a century after his death, that the town of Jaffrey finally recognized what a spiritual giant Amos had been, and began honoring his memory.

For all his dignity and pride, what comes through clearly about Amos, is that he, like Job, had little or no sense of entitlement. That is amazing, since he so easily could have. He had, after all, purchased his way out of a slavery in which he never should have been in the first place. He had become a productive citizen of Jaffrey. He had conducted himself as an

exemplary Christian. Didn't that entitle him to be respected, accepted and treated as an equal by the people of that town? That sounds right to me. Had I been in his shoes, I would have thought so. Somehow, though, he hadn't drifted into believing that he "owned" that about his life and situation, which was only on loan to him(as is true of the terms of the lives of all of us). So much rides upon the assumptions one makes about life, doesn't it?

In a short article by a woman who worked in one of the front line human assistance agencies, she said that, for an indigent person, who has lived on the street, hand-to-mouth, on the very edge, there's a very crucial juncture when their circumstances begin to turn around. She said that when this once-destitute person has now developed some living skills, has formed some work habits, and has employment, he or she goes one of two, very divergent directions. As he gets a bit ahead financially, develops a bit of confidence, or is taking some pride in it all, he either unfolds now, as a large-spirited, thankful, generous person, OR moves precisely the opposite direction, that is, frequently he will become wary, tightfisted, judgmental, and conceited.

It doesn't take a genius to figure out what makes the difference, does it? It's this same myth of entitlement. If that formerly indigent person believes that having lifted himself, all on his own, entirely "by his own bootstraps," and is finally GETTING BACK the life to which he was entitled all along, don't look for any thankfulness from him. Why be grateful for his having, himself, reclaimed that which had somehow been kept from him all this time?

The other one, meanwhile, who sees, as a geography of grace, that which has somehow, miraculously, brought him this far, has an entirely different understanding of what has gone on. He marvels at his having ended up at some right places at the right times, or maybe his being "gifted" with certain persons who called him forth from where he had been stuck, or it could have been random bits of hope or encouragement that mysteriously arrived in time to keep him moving. Whatever, he is in awe of it, and grateful.

This too has to do with the difference between Job and Mrs. Job. Mrs. Job's descendants are those who believe and assume that a certain, basic amount of blessings are owed them, that as a minimum, they have an inherent right to a fair share of security, pleasantness and overall well-being. Some are lucky enough to keep the illusion in place for quite awhile, but it is nonetheless, pure illusion.

The descendants of Job, on the other hand, are those who don't believe themselves to be owed anything. They, therefore, are grateful for each day of being alive, whether it is pleasant or difficult. They understand their health (when it is there), and the lives of their loved ones,

and the moments of joy or contentment, as being today's gifts, today's examples of God's Grace to them. Despite the pain or griefs that also come along, they remain whole, spiritually intact, and affirming of life's goodness. It is that simple and that important! What is the drift of your own thinking in regard to your life? Be wary of the ability of this myth of entitlement to infect your thinking. Resist it for all you're worth! It can turn thanks into bitterness, and misfortune into tragedy!