

“Skin for Skin” / Job 1:1, 2:1-10 / 7 October 2012

“Skin for skin,” a theatrical Satan declares, in our strange reading from the Book of Job. “Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives!” I’m not sure exactly what he means, but I think he’s saying that people are all the same. Skin for skin, no matter what color that skin may be, all humankind is essentially alike. We’re the same in our passions and compassions. We’re the same in our fears.

The sun rose fifteen hours ago over the snowy peak of Mt. Fuji and the terraced rice paddies of Japan. Before you and I even went to bed last night, that old sun was already spreading its morning light over ancient pagodas on the outskirts of Tokyo. Commuter trains were already bearing their early passengers from place to place, still heavy with sleep. And then, without looking back, that old sun just kept rolling across the sky. Stars are creatures of habit, “unyielding, unhasting,” as the old hymn tells it. The sun continued its westward trek, so that now, as I speak, Kyoto and Nagasaki stand again under cover of night. And as it journeyed across the skies of our world, it wakened factory workers in China, coughing and on the foul air of their soot-stained land. The October sun touched the great gold domes of the Kremlin. As it pierced the darkness on the west coast of Africa, that sun lighted upon the familiar faces of people I once knew and loved, people whose dear faces I may never see again. But “that lucky old sun” gets to see them every day. As it made its way across the big skies of our globe on this World Communion Sunday, the sun saw Christians of every land, every tongue, gathered around the table. Though the day is growing old, by global standards, now it is our turn at last to sit around Christ’s table, to share in the bond of common life, common humanity that binds us to people we love, people we don’t love, people we know, people we will never know, as well as people we will never see again. What a powerful symbol, the table!

And so, on this one day each year, at least, we are all sitting around a common table that stretches from the Land of the Rising Sun across the miles to this very place and beyond. People need something to gather around. They need something visible and concrete to bring them together. People need symbols to unite them, things like flags, or songs, or buildings...or tables. People live by symbols, and when human life is stripped of meaningful symbols, we begin to drift off into the ways of isolation and despair.

Think of the things that bring people together in your life. I’ve often looked at my own siblings—scattered from Pittsburgh to the Pacific Northwest. We were close as kids. We never lived in the same house for very long, but wherever we lived, my sister (the only girl) got her own room. My three brothers and I always shared a bedroom, four boys stacked into bunk beds like soldiers in their barracks. There was always just enough space between the bunks for a walkway leading to a single dresser. Toys had to be stored under the beds. It was tight. When one of us rolled over in bed, we all heard it. When one of us had a nightmare, all of us knew it. We could tell by the noises in the dark bedroom if our brothers were asleep, because asleep breathing is different from awake breathing. We knew when someone got up to get a glass of water. We lived in intimate connection with each other, far more intimate than any of us liked at the time. It made for a lot of quarrels and frustrations, but it also made us into a close family. But as we all grew up and went away to college, that closeness faded. And I think I know why. One thing that we never had was the same old house to return to. By the time I graduated high

school, I had changed schools systems six times. There was just no permanence. But worse, there was no place—no symbol—to bring us back together.

Now, I know that some families have to move, and the moving actually does bring them closer together. But I look at my wife's family which, over the years, has really become my principle family. They were fractured by divorce early on. They're divided along political, social, and religious lines. They fight and cry and make amends like a 1980s sitcom. But they're still close because their shared drama unfolds on a single set, the same old house where they all grew up, the selfsame house where their father still lives. They've got a place, a powerful symbol of group identity, that unites them and keeps them a strong family. Symbols! Nations gather around flags and songs, traditions and shared stories. Families gather around houses, and pieces of furniture, and shared stories. Communities of faith unite around steeples, and tables, and again, shared storied. They're the symbols of belonging, symbols that give life meaning. I recently came into possession of the bed that my mother was born in. It's one of those high beds with an ornately carved headboard. It belonged to my great-great-grandfather in the 1880s, a man whose name—Christian—is my middle name. He, too, was a minister but in one of those Pennsylvania Dutch denominations that you find in the middle of the state. It's said that he spoke Pennsylvania Dutch and little else. What a symbol, connecting me to ages past! What are the most powerful symbols in your life? And when your most meaningful symbols have gone away, what will remain for you?

We've just read an odd story from Job, the Bible's oldest book. You may think that Genesis came first, but no. Linguists have found that Job is the most ancient text in the Hebrew Scriptures. It's Israel's *Beowulf*, except a whole lot deeper. It's an old epic poem that searches for meaning amid the losses and tragedies of human life. These opening scenes unfold in the heavenly courts, where supernatural creatures appear before their Creator to give an account of their doings. And among these is old Satan. Now, in most of the Old Testament, Satan is God's servant. Satan is the District Attorney of the divine court. His job is to prosecute offenders. But more, he's supposed to test people to find out how faithful they are. By Jesus' day, the notion of Satan had evolved, and he was seen more as God's enemy than God's servant. Do what you like with the evolution of evil. I'm mainly interested in the story itself, and in words that the writer puts in old Satan's mouth. He says, basically, "Let me test your faithful servant Job. I'm pretty sure that if I make him miserable enough, I can get him to curse you." And then those chilling words: "Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives." Satan afflicts Job, beginning with a skin disease—fittingly enough—then taking Job's family and possessions, the very symbols of divine blessing. But Job remains devout.

What roots you, what holds you together, when the symbols around which you've built your life go away? What part of your identity—like Job's faithfulness—relies on something more enduring than the people and the things that we love? A husband and wife were on the ninth green when suddenly she collapsed from a heart attack. "Help me dear," she groans to her husband. The man called 911 on his cell phone, talked for a few minutes, then picked up his putter and lined up his putt. His wife raised her head off the green and stared at him. "I'm dying here, and you're putting?" "Don't worry dear," said the husband calmly, "they found a doctor on the second hole and he's coming to help you." "Well, how long before he gets here?" she asks. "No time at all," said her husband. "Everybody has already agreed to let him play through." Golfers! When

calamity or misfortune strikes, you find out very quickly what a person's character is made of. You learn very fast what matters to him or her.

Is it true, what Job's devil says? Is it true that people will give anything at all to save their own lives? They might give up all their money. And their time. And their energy. But I don't believe that everyone will give up their principles. In fact, many people die for their ideals, their values, or beliefs. When the unthinkable happens, as we find in Job, you discover right quickly who will save his own skin at all cost and who is dedicated to something more than himself. I think of it as a taproot, just like some plants and trees have. A taproot is a strong, central root that grounds some living things firmly, so that the wind can break their branches, and strip their leaves, and bend their trunks, but it can never kill them altogether. Helping people to develop their taproots is one of the most important jobs of church.

That great sun is marching westward across our skies, and Christians of every place break bread with us, celebrating our common humanity. By the time it gets back around to Tokyo, the sun will have seen about 400,000 new births and 160,000 deaths. The sun, that watchful eye, will have seen murders, and thefts, and bullying acts. It will have seen shameful secrets. But it will also have seen great acts of courage, and faithfulness, and love. Before this day is through, that sun will see heartbreaking acts of selflessness and generosity. Some of them committed by people we know, some committed even by you or by me. And the sun will keep its secrets, as it always has. And most of the stories that unfolded this day under its watch will never, never be told. Skin for skin, we're all the same. Some will come to harm; another will find great joy. But whatever life brings, it's possible to endure.

And if our symbols go away, our flags, our cherished buildings, perhaps even our table! If our symbols go away, how will we be calm and faithful people whose happiness fades, but whose deep joy endures? I'm convinced that everyone has the capacity to endure like old Job did. Everyone has the capacity to develop a taproot to hold them fast when life's storms strike. The problem is that we are forever trying to plant our roots into the symbols instead of the things that the symbols represent. I've come to believe that when all our other stuff is swept away, acts of kindness still stand. It sounds shallow, almost too simple to be true, but the best truths are at once simple and complex. If you want to stand fast in the midst of the storm, don't invest your life's energies into appearances, or comforts, or status. Throw yourself into prayer and kindness. And you will see how these things return to shelter you when other things go away. Amen.