

“The Hearing of the Ear” / Job 42:1-6 & 10-17 / 28 October 2012

Poor Job. After all that calamity and drama, after all that pain, and hardship, and misunderstanding, all those sleepless nights, Job finally says to God, “You know, I’d heard about you with the hearing of the ear, I finally feel like I really know you.” The suffering taught Job things about life, and faith, and reality that no Bible study class or sermon could ever teach. Why is it that real and useful knowledge, like all growth, only comes with painful experience? Why is it that the most valuable lessons in this life can’t be learned by any other means than firsthand experience?

The story that I’m about to read to you is supposedly true. A first grade teacher had twenty-six students in her class. She wanted to see how well those six-year-olds knew the traditional proverbs of our culture. A proverb, as you know, is a folksy wisdom statement, like the kind that Benjamin Franklin used to make. “A stitch in time saves nine.” “A friend in need is a friend indeed.” In any case, this first grade teacher wanted to test the conventional knowledge of her students. She gave each child a piece of paper with the first half of some time-honored proverb, and then she asked each child to complete his or her proverb. While not a single child got any of the proverbs exactly right, there was a strange degree of wisdom in some of their answers.

The first child’s proverb was, “Don’t change horses,” and the child completed the phrase with, “until they stop running.” The second child got, “Strike while the,” and she finished the phrase with, “bug is close.” “It’s always darkest before...daylight savings time.” “Never underestimate the power of...termites.” “You can lead a horse to water, but...how?” “Don’t bite the hand that...looks dirty.” “No news is...impossible.” “A miss is as good as a...mister.” “You can’t teach an old dog new...math.” (I could never learn new math, either.) “If you lie down with the dogs, you’ll...stink in the morning.” “Love all, trust...me.” “The pen is mightier than the...pigs.” “An idle mind is...the best way to relax.” “Where there’s smoke, there’s...pollution.” “Happy is the bride that...gets all the presents.” “A penny saved is...not much.” “Two’s company, three’s...the Musketeers.” “Don’t put off till tomorrow what you...put on for bed.” “Laugh and the whole world laughs with you, cry and you...have to blow your nose.” “There are none so blind as...Stevie Wonder.” “Children should be seen and not...spanked or grounded.” “If at first you don’t succeed...get new batteries.” “You get out of something only what you...see in the picture on the box.” “When the blind lead the blind...get out of the way.” “A bird in the hand...is going to poop on you.” And finally, “Better late than...pregnant.”

Many of these same kids probably already know their math facts. And they know enough about spelling and the alphabet to make do. But these old traditional proverbs tend to be the things that our friends and relatives mutter at us when life throws us a curveball. We only hear some of these proverbs when we’ve messed up, or if someone in our life wants to point out our mistakes. In other words, we only learn the proverbs of our culture after long, hard experience that a six-year-old cannot be expected to possess. To grasp a proverb usually means that you’ve suffered a little bit. You’ve changed horses in midstream, and it didn’t work. You’ve bitten the hand that fed you. You’ve lost the bird in hand by vainly chasing after two in the bush. Real, firsthand knowledge always requires some degree of hardship and suffering. Whether you want to learn to speak Haitian Creole, or drive an 18-wheeler, or understand the stock market, it can only happen after you’ve poured a part of yourself into the thing that you’re learning.

What things do you know best? Some of us know finance, and architecture, and foreign languages. Some of us know dentistry, and medieval dance, and how to let a soufflé rise. But the things that we know most intimately, the things that we know best, are not the things that we learned in school, as valuable as education is. The things that we know best of all are the things that life taught us along the way. We can tell, by the way they breathe, whether our spouse is awake or asleep. We know things about our children and our pets that they will never know about us. The things I know best of all are not New Testament Greek and the Ecumenical Creeds. No, my most complete knowledge has to do with things that don't do the world a bit of good. I know how to work a 30-year old rototiller. It's the only engine I've ever repaired. I know where in my lawn I have to step carefully around the old holes left by long-gone fenceposts. You could break a leg if you didn't know. I know things about my children that will surely embarrass them when they're older. I have intimate knowledge of siblings and old friends from long ago, people I very rarely see, but that knowledge is still sitting there, waiting to be put to use. I remember the back roads between certain villages in Africa, and it's knowledge that I will never call upon again. All these things I know well, but every time I help my second grader with her math homework, I ask myself, "What am I going to do when they start learning decimals and fractions?" I don't really remember much about anything more advanced than simple arithmetic. In my day-to-day life, I've never really needed to remember all that algebraic stuff about coefficients and variables.

There are two ways to know a thing: you can know *about* it, the way you and I know about Tianaman Square in China or the sequoia trees of California. Or you can *really know* the thing, the way a person knows his or her spouse, or child, or profession, or native language, or face. One kind of knowledge is theoretical; the other kind only comes through trial and error, relationship, and mistakes, the pain of intimacy. And so, it's interesting that Job tells God, "I only had a head knowledge of you before all my suffering started. Now I know who you really are." Real, firsthand knowledge is always sloppy, and it only comes about in the often-painful arena of daily life.

On the last Sunday in October, we observe "Reformation Day." Early in my career, I didn't do much with Reformation Day because I felt that it emphasized the differences between Catholics and Protestants. I believe that in this day and age, we need to emphasize the things that bring people together, not the things that divide us. Bower Hill Church is committed to ecumenical and interfaith cooperation. We don't think our truth is truer than anyone else's. And yet, the Catholic Church in the late middle ages was very different from what it is today; it stood in need of certain reforms. And we can tell our story without any disrespect to our Catholic neighbors.

Five hundred years ago, the clergyman stood up here and spoke in Latin. People flocked to church in those days; the churches were packed, even though nobody in the pews understood a word that was being said. Most priests understood only a fraction of what they were saying, a word here and a word there. Mostly, they read from books in old Latin, which even then was a dead language. And yet, the people came back week after week to sit and listen. There was no singing in church, no hymns, no participation from the pews. Only professional choirs sang, and only men could be in the choir. So, in order to sing the higher notes, there had to be eunuchs, men who had been given to the church in infancy, men who underwent a primitive sort of surgery so that they could hit those soprano parts.

Communion was celebrated only a few times a year. And at communion, the priest stood at the altar, turned his back on the congregation, then served himself and nobody else. The people were excluded. And yet, they just kept coming back for more because they wanted to know God.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther, a young priest in Germany spoke up. “Hey, wait a minute. Look, the people out there know when to stand and when to sit, when to cross themselves and when to kneel. But they don’t comprehend a word that’s being said. Shouldn’t they get to hear this stuff in their mother tongue? Shouldn’t people get to sing out in worship, and participate, and take communion? Is this just a gig for the professional clergy, or is it for everyone?” Others had made these observations before Martin Luther, and all of them were hunted down and killed for speaking out. An idea can only flourish when the time is right, and the time at last had come for the people to step up and take back the church. And once they’d gained power in the church, it was only a matter of time before the people would seek to gain power elsewhere, establishing new forms of government with parliaments, and congresses, and liberties, and rights. And so, out of one man’s courage and vision, a new day dawned, a day where every person was encouraged to discover what or who God is in his or her own life, a day when every person was encouraged to hear and to read the Scriptures in their own language, a day when every person was encouraged to discover his or her unique calling in life. It was no longer just for the priests. But—as you know—all of this only came after great upheaval, and decades of warfare, and personal threats to anyone who broke away from the old ways. Growing pains. Intimate knowledge usually comes with suffering.

A Methodist pastor, a Catholic priest, and a Presbyterian minister were all fishing in a rowboat. The Methodist said, “I’m going to take a nap,” and he walked across the water to the shore. The priest said, “I need to floss my teeth,” and he walked across the water to the shore. The Presbyterian minister sat there, a little uncertain. Finally, he got out of the boat, stepped onto the water, and sank like a rock. The Catholic looked at the Methodist and said, “Should we show him where the stones are?” Ah, isn’t that the problem with life? It takes us so long to learn where the stones are. In terms of that great religious Reformation of the 1500s, I think we’re learning that we Protestants ended up jettisoning some things we should have kept. And the Church of Rome in the 1960s finally addressed many of Martin Luther’s concerns, though I understand that the current pope has returned to selling indulgences. The point is that we’ve all learned and grown down through the years. We’ve changed things about ourselves, our church, and our world, that we never would have believed. And we’re all better off for it.

Until he had suffered, Job only knew God “by the hearing of the ear.” Many of us can say the same thing. Our faith was theoretical...until we got dragged through life’s mud, and we discovered a divine presence even—and especially—there in our darkest hours. There are things that are only learned through messy experience, trial and error, real life relationship. Our world stands in perilous circumstances, and a lot of people are living with a vague sense of fear for the future. But maybe it is our sufferings that will redeem us. After having lived in a world that respects only power, maybe we’ll finally rejoice in the discovery of self-respect and the respect of our neighbors. After having lived in a world that only loves money, perhaps we’ll rejoice to love our neighbors, our enemies. Maybe all our knowledge has been “the hearing of the ear.” Perhaps, through our sufferings, we will finally come to know God and each other. Amen.