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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, in our sermon this morning, I want to begin by speaking about the character Job from the Bible.

Because the story of Job relates, I think, quite well with the message found in our gospel reading from Luke 17.

I want to talk about Job with respect to Jesus' understanding of true faithfulness.

PAUSE

Now we may remember that in the beginning of the book of Job, God and "the Satan" have a conversation.

"The Satan" here in this story is not yet our later theological understanding of the Spirit of Evil.

No, "the Satan" here is understood as the Accuser, the one who is responsible for testing human beings in their faithfulness to God.

So, God and the Accuser are having a conversation at the beginning of book of Job.

The Accuser has been wandering the earth apparently in search of people whom he might test.

And God says to the Accuser, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him, an upright and honest man. A man who fears God and shuns evil."

"Yes," says the Accuser, "But Job is not God-fearing for nothing, is he?"

The Accuser accuses God of blessing Job at every turn. For Job has flocks, and fields, and children.

Job has every good thing a human being could hope for.

In other words, the Accuser is saying, "Of course Job is going to be faithful to God because he has been well-rewarded for his faithfulness, but take away his possessions and see what happens."

And so, what does God do?

On a whim, God allows the Accuser to curse Job, such that Job's flocks are destroyed, and his children are wiped out.

And it is not a pretty picture of God to be sure, that God would just give free license to the Accuser to do as he pleases with Job.

And so, the Accuser has his way with Job.

But even Job experiences great loss, Job remains faithful to God, although Job does put God on trial, demanding from God an explanation.

To which God more or less says, "I am God, and you cannot understand my ways."

PAUSE

But the point of the story of Job is this.

Do we remain faithful to God only when God is good to us?

Do we remain faithful to God because we are blessed?

Do we remain faithful to God because of the rewards we reap for our faithfulness?

Do we remain faithful to God because of the rewards we hope to reap, like everlasting life?

And what happens when life throws us a curve ball, and all of sudden things are not going our way?

What then?

What happens then to our faith?

PAUSE

In the same vein, in our Gospel reading today, Jesus says to his followers, "Do you reward your servants for doing what is expected of them?"

“Do you reward your servants when they come in from working the fields, by inviting them to come to the table to eat?”

“No, but what do you do?”

“You command them to prepare supper for you. You command them to serve you while you eat and drink. And then later they are allowed to take their meal,” Jesus says.

“You do not thank the slave for doing what was commanded.”

“Their service is expected. Their service is demanded. And they do not get a special reward for that.”

And so Jesus here is challenging us with respect to our faithfulness.

Do we do things for the Gospel because we expect to be rewarded?

Do we do things because we hope God will take notice and bless us?

And what happens when that is not the case?

What happens when we feel slighted by God?

What happens when we feel our faithful service has not been recognized?

Or what happens when life throws us a curve ball and we suffer some tragedy like Job?

Do we become cynical?

Do we become disillusioned in our faith?

Do we withdraw from God, and even curse God?

That is the question posed in the book of Job.

And that is the question our Lord Jesus is asking us in the Gospel today.

The question is, “Is your faith based on a system of rewards?”

Or is your faith something deeper than that?

PAUSE

Now in my 24 years of pastoral ministry, I have watched many people leave the institution of the Church.

I have watched many people no longer come to worship or be a part of the faith community.

Sometimes it is because the people in the church upset them.

Sometimes it is because they feel the church is not providing for their needs.

And sometimes it is because they have felt betrayed by God, or abandoned by God, or even cursed by God.

Sometimes people have had their own tragic experience like Job, and they have said, "Enough is enough. This God-thing is not for me. I no longer need or desire a relationship with God."

And I get it. I would feel the same way if I felt that I was continually being smacked by God while I was down.

I get it.

That phrase, "God will never give you more than you can handle," I think is a lot of hooey, even though there is a stronger word I would like to use.

And the book of Job is prime example of God giving a person more than he or she can handle.

God allows the Accuser to curse Job beyond measure: his flocks, his fields, his children are just gone.

So I get it. I get it when in my ministry I have witnessed people turn away from God.

Nonetheless, I grieve for them. I feel for them. And I hope that they are able to make their peace with God.

So in my ministry, I am not befuddled when people turn away from God and the Church.

I am more befuddled when people are able to continue to believe and stick it out with God, who as we see in the book of Job, can be very arbitrary in allowing suffering to happen.

How people maintain their faith, when the system of rewards and blessings all but breaks down, to me—that is miraculous!

PAUSE

And I was thinking about this, as I was listening to a lecture the other day, given by Ellie Wiesel, who if we don't remember, was a holocaust survivor.

He died only some years ago in 2016.

But in this lecture, Wiesel noted that he still believed in God.

Now, here is a man who if there was anyone who had the right to deny and curse God, and turn away from his faith, it is he.

At the age of 15, he and his family were imprisoned in the Auschwitz Concentration Camp, where his mother and sister were murdered upon arrival.

Wiesel and his father worked as laborers in the camp, but were later moved to the Buchenwald Camp, where his father died, before the camp was liberated.

Wiesel survived, but what is more amazing is that his faith survived.

And he noted that what helped him carry on after that unfathomable experience was intense study and inquiry.

He noted just how much he had always loved to learn, and he continued to believe in God.

PAUSE

Faith is something far deeper than the mere system of rewards and blessings.

“I will believe because God is good to me. And I will continue to believe until God is no longer good to me.”

Faith is something more than that, so says the book of Job and so says Jesus our Lord.

In fact, I think Jesus in our Gospel reading is actually getting at even deeper existential question.

I think Jesus is critiquing our very humanity.

I believe Jesus is actually asking us “What does it mean to be human?”

Put aside faith for a moment, and let us ask do humans do things only for rewards?

Or are humans capable of doing things selflessly?

Are humans capable of being altruistic, so as not to seek some reward for themselves?

Are humans capable of saying, "We have done only what we ought to have done"?

Can we humans be truly faithful in these terms?

Can humans do things just for the sake of doing what is right?

PAUSE

There is Jewish word in the Bible for this. It is the word "hesed."

Hesed is doing what only ought to have been done. It is doing right. It is being altruistic. It is being selfless.

And an example of such a person in the Bible is the person Ruth, who along with her sister Orpa, and her mother-in-law Naomi, all three lost their husbands. They are all widows.

And Naomi then tells her daughters-in-law to leave her and find new husbands.

But Ruth stays with her mother-in-law Naomi, even though there was no law in Judaism requiring Ruth to do so.

Ruth says those most famous words, which are sometimes included in wedding ceremonies, "Wherever you go, I shall go, wherever you live, I shall live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God."

That is hesed. It is going above what the law requires. It is doing only what ought to have been done.

And that is true faithfulness.

PAUSE

In my own life, I have at times wondered what hesed, what true faith, looks like.

Indeed my wife and I talk about what we ought to do, and interestingly enough our conversation at times revolves around what retirement might look like for us.

Now that we have both hit 50, we have started to think about our twilight days.

Although, we recognize that we have quite a number of years to go before retirement age.

Nevertheless, we imagine that time, and we have both noted that neither of us can really imagine ever truly retiring from the ministry.

Preaching and teaching, and working with other Christians is not just a job for us, it is in a big sense who we are.

We don't do ministry necessarily for the rewards, we don't look out to future, such that we think about when we will have enough to retire.

And we are not counting down the years towards that time when we can hang it up.

I guess you could say that as pastors we are doing only what we ought to be doing. And this, I guess, is our expression of true faithfulness.

To be sure, we are pastors well not because it is a career, but we are pastors because it is our callings.

So, as long as we are physically able to serve, I think we will probably stay in ministry.

Like I said, because ministry is so much who we are, we can't imagine doing anything else.

Again, is that being truly faithful? I don't know. I hope so.

Maybe deep down we do seek the rewards of ministry.
Maybe deep down we seek the reward of feeling needed.
Maybe deep down we seek the reward of feeling useful.

I don't know for sure.

PAUSE

So, ultimately what am I saying to all of us? Only that our lives, Sisters and Brothers in Christ, our lives in God's eyes are not based on a rewards system. That is how the world understands human existence. That is how the world structures society.

But, faith is about living and doing what ought to be done, and simply being grateful for the opportunity to serve. That is in itself reward enough.

Yes, clinging to faith in all circumstances, and acting in faith when we should, that is its own reward.

Thanks be to God. Amen.