

"Anything You Can Do" – October 15, 2006

Preached by the Rev. Ruth E. Shaver at the United Church of Schellsburg, Schellsburg, PA

The 18th Sunday after Pentecost

Stewardship 5 - Gifts

Job 23:1-10, Mark 10:17-31

A young woman went to her mother and told her about her life and how things were so hard for her. She did not know how she was going to make it and wanted to give up. She was tired of fighting and struggling. It seemed as one problem was solved, a new one arose.

Her mother took her to the kitchen. She filled three pots with water and placed each on a high fire. Soon the pots came to boil. In the first she placed carrots, in the second she placed eggs, and in the last she placed ground coffee beans. She let them sit and boil, without saying a word.

In about twenty minutes she turned off the burners. She fished the carrots out and placed them in a bowl. She pulled the eggs out and placed them in a bowl. Then she ladled the coffee out and placed it in a bowl.

Turning to her daughter, she asked, "Tell me, what do you see?"

"Carrots, eggs, and coffee," she replied

Her mother brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots. She did and noted that they were soft.

The mother then asked the daughter to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell, she observed the hard boiled egg.

Finally, the mother asked the daughter to sip the coffee. The daughter smiled as she tasted its rich aroma.

The daughter then asked, "What does it mean, mother?"

Her mother explained that each of these objects had faced the same adversity ... boiling water. Each reacted differently. The carrot went in strong, hard, and unrelenting. However, after being subjected to the boiling water, it softened and became weak. The egg had been fragile. Its thin outer shell had protected its liquid interior, but after sitting through the boiling water, its inside became hardened. The ground coffee beans were unique, however. After they were in the boiling water, they had changed the water.

"Which are you?" she asked her daughter. "When adversity knocks on your door, how do you respond? Are you a carrot, an egg or a coffee bean?"

Samson is a Biblical example of a carrot – as solid a man and leader as you’d ever want until exposed to a pot of hot water named Delilah. Jonah is an example of an egg – fragile of heart and soul at first, then once exposed to the hot water of the repentance of the Ninevites, hard-boiled and tough.

Job is a terrific example of a coffee bean. When we first meet Job, he has it all – a beautiful wife, many happy and productive children, lots of land and many wonderful things to make a comfortable life, and, most important of all, strong faith in God that makes him a righteous, moral man. He is, in short, like a whole coffee bean, aromatic and full of potential.

And then, along came Joe the Satan. His name isn’t really Joe, of course – but it’s not “Satan” with a capital “S”, either, if you remember last week. For convenience sake, and because that’s my sense of humor, we’re calling Heaven’s Grand Inquisitor “Joe” in recognition of the fact that Pope Benedict XVI, formerly Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, was once the Grand Inquisitor of the Roman Catholic Church – just by a different title.

Anyway, along came Joe the Satan, walking to and fro across the width and up and down the length of the earth looking for men and women whose faith needed testing. Not tempting, the way we think of the Devil or Satan with a capital “S”, but testing. Joe’s operational theology is that people will only praise God when times are good. Let things go a bit to the bad side and people will curse God with all their might, proving their unworthiness as God’s Chosen People.

God, praised be, thinks Joe is wrong and holds up Job as the perfect example.

You can almost hear Annie Oakley in the challenge Joe the Satan issues to God, can’t you?

Anything you can do, I can do better!

I can do anything better than you.

No, you can’t. Yes, I can.

No, you can’t. Yes, I can.

Yes, I can. Yes, I can!¹

Now, God’s not one to let a challenge go unanswered, so he tells Joe the Satan to do his worst.

And he does. He puts Job through a metaphorical coffee grinder and turns Job from a whole bean to coffee grounds.

Job loses everything: houses, animals, children and grandchildren, his health, the whole lot of it, except his wife. His wife, remember, advises him to “curse God and die” after all of this

¹ “Anything You Can Do” from *Annie, Get Your Gun*, words and lyrics by Irving Berlin. ©1946 by Irving Berlin.

happens, so maybe keeping her is as much a curse as everything else. And before anyone goes there, that statement applies *only* to Job's wife, not to anyone else's wife.

We naturally turn to our friends when we're down and out, but Job's friends are absolutely no help to him. They are all stuck in the dominant theology of the day, one that equated success with God's blessing and being a righteous person and failure with God's curse and being a wicked person. It's a works righteousness theology that posits that if Job is suffering this much, then he must have done something for which he needs to repent.

But Job insists that he has done nothing wrong at all. He wants his day in court – God's court. And furthermore, he knows that God will listen to him because God is fair and just. If only Job could find God.

We'll hear how the story ends in more detail over the next two weeks, but Job is going to get a big surprise when he finally finds God right where God has always been. Where Joe the satan challenged God with Annie Oakley's defiant "Yes, I can!" attitude, God gives Job the what-for with simple declaratives that might, had God allowed Job to speak in rebuttal, have sounded like this:

Anything you can be, I can be greater.
Sooner or later, I'm greater than you.
No, you're not. Yes, I am.
No, you're not. Yes, I am.
Yes, I am. Yes, I am!²

And since God's name, Yahweh, means "I am", it really works, doesn't it?

When we look at the Gospel lesson today, we see a very successful, very wealthy man who is caught in the same works righteousness theology as all of Job's friends. He tells Jesus that he has followed all the rules and been righteous according to the law all his life and has been blessed because of his righteous behavior.

That is not, Jesus informs him, the way to enter into God's kingdom. The way to enter into God's kingdom is to give up material wealth by giving it to the poor and to follow Jesus in service to others.

Ouch.

Can you imagine giving up your possessions? All of them?

I'd be utterly lost without my laptop. It's a tool of my ministry. Did Jesus really mean I have to give up my computer?

² Berlin, *ibid.*

I'd never get a hospital visit or nursing home visit done without my car. It's a tool of my ministry. Did Jesus really mean I have to give up my car?

The problem inherent in a theology of works righteousness is that it is fraught with opportunity for idolatry. I hope that I am not required to give up my laptop or my car to follow Jesus. But I also pray that I am not so reliant upon those two material items, or any other material item, that I have raised those items to the status of idols.

That's really what Jesus is teaching us in the first part of this passage. When we, like Job's friends and like the rich young man, place things ahead of our devotion to God, then we become idolaters. And it is very, very hard to give up our idols – hence Jesus' saying that, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

Whether that needle is a sewing needle or, more likely, the man-sized opening in the Jerusalem walls called "The Gate of the Eye of a Needle", the point is clear. Attachment to things leads to detachment from God.

Even Jesus' theology is not without its rewards, however. While a works righteousness theology equates good behavior with material wealth, Jesus' theology makes clear that doing what is right before God leads to eternal rewards in heaven. Jesus' theology does not promise an easy earthly life – who wants fields of persecutions! – but it does promise life eternal where those who are first in the world – wealthy, powerful, influential – will be last and those who were last – the widow, the orphan, and the oppressed – will be first. By extension, those who try to be wealthy, powerful, and influential are toward the back of the line, while those who work to alleviate the suffering of the widow, the orphan, and the oppressed will be toward the front of the line.

Another way of thinking about it is that those who are like the boiled carrot – soft and mushy – and those who are like the boiled egg – hard and tough – will be last and those who are like the boiled coffee beans – which changed the water – will be first.

The best way to be a coffee bean is to put God first in all things. The hot water of life's difficulties becomes the rich, full bodied brew so many of us love and crave when we organize our priorities properly. And that includes all the gifts and talents God has given to us.

“Anything you can do, I can do better,”³ becomes simply, “Anything you can do,” to show the love and compassion of God to all people.

That means being good stewards of the gifts and talents that God has given to us. One of the most important lessons I learned as a child came as a result of being the Megan Wertz of my day. My parents, much as Gail has done for Megan, made sure that I knew that my vocal talent came from God and was to be used for God’s glory – which meant learning to sing well and practicing faithfully. I never took a formal voice lesson until last year, but I was privileged to have excellent vocal coaches throughout my elementary and secondary school years as well as amazing choral directors in churches. To this day, it’s easier for me to sing than it is for me to preach, though God has seen fit to make preaching my primary role. Who says God doesn’t have a sense of humor?

We share our gifts here in amazing ways. Nick gave us a wonderful gift this morning by sharing his own voice. Alice uses her gift of humor and wisdom as well as her deep faith as our worship leader each week. Joanie keeps us all going with her determination and ability to motivate us even when the going looks tough. Ann, Lori, Marcia, Barb, Farrah, Suzie, Peggy, Laurel, Denise, and Michelle, who teach Sunday School for us, use their patience, grace, and creativity to lead our children to a deeper relationship with God.

We give our gifts of time and talent to service organizations like the Girl and Boy Scouts, the VFW, the Lions, TOPS, the Literacy Council, Homewood, the Shawnee Valley Fire Company, the Red Cross, the food bank, and the Bedford County Children and Youth Advisory Committee – all of which in one form or another either serve those who are “last” in society today or work to keep people from going to the back of the line.

Stewardship of gifts, as of service, prayer, and presence, is a lifestyle. Where we choose to use our talents and time says much about us as human beings and much more about our relationship with God. As we move closer to pledge Sunday, I’d like you to give serious thought to what you are going to do in the next year to use the talents God has given you for God’s greater glory. How will you be a coffee bean instead of a carrot or an egg?

You can start, by the way, by inviting someone to come to church with you next week for “Homecoming”. I know that there are many folks you would like to see come back to church – so start with them. There are also people who may be waiting for an invitation before they feel

³ Berlin, *ibid.*

comfortable walking through the doors, so use those God-given talents of persuasion, welcome, and caring to walk with them through the doors. You might even have the talent to make them an engraved invitation – though I don't know how many people are actually waiting for one of those . . .

Be a coffee bean for God. "Anything you can do" is what you and I are called to do with our talents as we strive to bring God's love and compassion to the world.