

5th Sunday in Ordinary Time – B

One of the most obvious facts about life to the thoughtful observer is that it is not easy. Indeed, it is often quite difficult; and sometimes for some people it seems to be impossible.

One such person is found in today's Old Testament reading. His name was Job, and his story is legendary. When first he appears on the biblical page, he was a man of good health, great wealth, a large and loving family, and the respect of his friends and neighbors. Then one day, the winds of fortune suddenly shifted; and Job's life drastically change. His enemies stole his flocks and herds and, in the process, slaughtered most of his servants. A desert storm rolled in killing all of his children. After that, his health failed and his body was covered with sores. In the midst of all of this, his wife suggesting that the best thing he could do was "curse God and die." Finally, his friends came to gaze upon his misery and tell him that all of his suffering was obviously a punishment for some secret sin in his life.

Is it any wonder that Job felt and said the things recorded in our reading? He described man's life on earth as drudgery. He spoke of his own sleepless nights and hopeless days, then ended his speech by saying, "I shall not see happiness again."

Most of us cannot match Job's story of suffering. We have never known what it is to lose virtually everything to one swift stroke of cruel fate. But we have struggled with the fatalistic feeling that life is too much for us, that circumstances are our masters and we are nothing more than helpless victims. Most of us have lain awake at night and wondered if the dawn would ever come. Most of us have walked through days when a sense of hopelessness was our constant companion. Most of us have wondered if we would ever see happiness again. If you have never felt any of these things,

stick around long enough and you will. The plain truth is that life is hard, and sometimes it gets us down.

The source of such feelings is as wide and various as human experiences, but Job's story pretty well covers the spectrum.

Part of his problem was financial. He had been a man of means; but in a matter of hours, or perhaps days, his fortune had been wiped out. Poverty is a difficult thing, especially for those who were once wealthy. Many people today find themselves in a similar circumstance as Job. This is not to say they were wealthy, but they were making it. There was enough money every month to pay the bills and maybe a little extra; but one day, through no fault of their own, they lost their jobs. Their paychecks stopped, but the bills keep coming. Now, every day for them is a struggle for economic survival. Then there are those who have never known anything but poverty. They were born in it and have lived in it all of their lives. For them, the biggest question in life has always been the where and when of their next meal. To be poor is one of the most devastating experiences that can happen to human spirit. Job found that out.

Another part of his problem was the loss of loved ones. All of his children had died in one storm. Think of that. A man who had lost his teenage daughter to leukemia was talking about it years later. A friend asked, "How long did it take to get over it?" The man was quiet for a moment and then answered thoughtfully: "I am not sure that I have gotten over it, but I have learned to live with it." The only people who can comprehend that kind of pain are those who have known it. Life isn't easy.

Still another part of Job's burden was physical illness. Along with all of his other problems, he got sick; and that can be hard to handle. Sometime we may observe what serious illness can do to people. It not only wracks the

body; it works on the spirit. Many people rise above it and live triumphantly, but don't think that it is easy to do. Life can look pretty depressed from a sick-bed; and like Job, you can find yourself thinking that the good times and the happy times are gone forever.

The last element of Job's problems, and perhaps the most difficult, was broken relationships. His wife offered no support of any kind. She was ready to give up and recommended that he should do the same. While he was trying desperately to hang on to his faith and courage, she was advising him to curse God and die. Then came three of his friends, and they were even worse. They just sat and looked at him; and then they began to accuse him. Their theology was that suffering always came as a punishment for sin.

Broken relationships can be the most painful experiences of life, even worse than poverty, sickness or death. Have you ever been betrayed by a friend, someone whom you really trusted? If you have any feeling to become cynical about life, that can do it to you. Talk to a middle-aged woman, whose husband walked in one day and said, "I don't love you anymore. Then he packed up his things and left." Few experiences, if any, are more difficult to overcome than that.

Well, Job knew it all - the pain of poverty, the grief of death, the suffering of sickness, and the agony of broken relationships. And sometimes for similar reasons, we find ourselves in the same situation.

What should we do, when life gets us down?

My first suggestion would be that we never accept any feeling as final. Overwhelmed by his problems, Job said, "I shall not see happiness again." One can certainly understand how and why he would feel that way. But read the entire book, and you will discover that he was wrong. His happiness wasn't gone forever; he just thought it was.

Our feelings are in one aspect like the weather - changeable. Therefore, we must learn to wait. Time is a great healer. So when that little voice comes whispering that you will never see happiness again, try not to listen because it isn't telling you the truth. Argue with it. Look beyond today. Don't be convinced that your present mood is permanent, because it is not.

My next suggestion is predictable but absolutely imperative - hold on to your faith in God. Job did that. Throughout the course of his trial, he doubted; he resented; he argued; he wondered; but somehow, he held on to his faith; and it saw him through. If you study the story of Job in search of an explanation of the mystery of suffering, you will be disappointed, because it doesn't offer one. But it does offer something better - a way to overcome. Toward the end of the book, you will find Job talking to God, and here is what he said: "I had heard of you by word of mouth, but now my eyes have seen you."

That was all he had - an awareness of God; but as it turned out, that was all he needed. Life had him down; but it could not keep him there, because he held on to his faith.

My prayer is that in days of discouragement and despair, you and I will have the wisdom to do the same. If we will hold on to our faith, life can never defeat us. It may get us down, but it will never be able to keep us there. **Amen.**