

Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Job 7:1-4, 6-7; 1Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23; and Mark 1:29-39

As a child, I was intrigued by the phrase in one of the final prayers of the rosary, "To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this valley of tears." Was life really that bad? I thought a lot about the suffering of my family members, living and dead, as well as my own. While life was often lovely, it did contain a lot that warranted a good cry. Holding this reality in my heart led to a sensitivity to the pain of others beyond my family.

When this awareness of suffering hits us – and the suffering of the pandemic and of racism has been overwhelming – we cry out. Pain does that to us. It also stirs up a desire for explanations as to how this whole living-thing works. It pushes us into a conversation or a confrontation with God because the pain is too big to be handled by anyone less. We need to have it out with "the boss."

Job turns to God in just such a situation. At the start of his story, Job is a healthy, wealthy family man. God allows Satan to take this all away to test whether Job will remain devoted when times get tough. Job remains faithful, but he has a lot to say to God about how this whole living-thing works. He laments his own suffering and sees how it is similar to the suffering of so many other people. We read, "Is not human life on earth a drudgery? ... My days on earth come to an end without hope." As the story unfolds, Job demands that God appear and justify Job's suffering. God appears but only to say Job does not get an explanation. Amazingly, Job accepts that: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I... repent in dust and ashes" (42:5-6). Argh! How can Job accept this answer? Perhaps the key lies in God's actual appearance to Job. God does hear our laments. God is close-at-hand when we suffer. God does respond. Maybe this is ultimately what we need.

In a very different style, today's gospel also shows God's concern for human suffering. The healing of Simon's mother-in-law companions the healing of the possessed man, which we read last Sunday. One story involves demonic possession, while the other is about a fever. While we may not know what the combination of the two represented in a pre-modern culture, it is clear Jesus does not limit his mercy to certain kinds of suffering. The pairing also shows that Jesus heals both men and women. I cannot overemphasize the significance of God's inclusivity in a society that treated women as property and that would quickly discard this inclusivity in the emerging Church. Finally, the first miracle happens in the synagogue and the other occurs in a home. God brings healing to our homes, yes, even our homes.

Notice how Jesus interacts with this woman, too lowly to be remembered by her own name. He approaches her; God comes to us in our suffering. Next Jesus takes her by the hand because we all need the deep tenderness and support of touch. Lastly, Jesus *ageiren* or raises her up, the verb used for resurrection. Healing is God's gift of resurrected life, a new existence within and with God.

Then Simon's mother-in-law *diakonei autois*, usually translated she served them. The natural outcome of resurrected healing is the mission to live in a new way, to become the servants of others. In this service, we join God in coming to those who are suffering and alleviating their suffering.

This is just what Paul is describing in 1Cor 8-10, of which our passage is but a tiny part. One group within the Christian community thought eating meat sacrificed to Roman gods showed belief in those gods. Some more sophisticated Christians realized that, since those gods do not exist, the meat is just meat. They ate it to show they knew better. But when they ate it, the less sophisticated bunch went ballistic. Paul calls on the meat-eating group to recognize the suffering they are causing and let concern for that suffering outweigh any need to show their superiority. In our passage, Paul says he is in a similar situation, insofar as he *could* demand better pay for his work as a preacher, but it would confuse folks. While Paul's argument has logical limits, it is a good reminder that, as God alleviates our suffering, we can embody that same relief for others.

- ❖ Share with God honestly and completely about your suffering. Let God respond just as completely.
- ❖ Where can you place concern for others' suffering of ahead of the need to show you know better?