

## “The Strength To Accompany”

When they were in the house again,  
the disciples asked Jesus about this.

Mark 10:10a

*A faithful churchgoer was talking with a skeptical friend about why he bothered going to church. The friend asked him what his favorite part of the service was. “Oh, I love most of it: the songs, the Doxology, Communion. The pastoral prayer can be pretty boring sometimes, but I even get something out of that. Overall, though, I guess I would say I get the most out of the sermon.” “How many sermons do you think you’ve sat through in your life?” the friend asked. The man said, “Oh, I don’t know. Couple thousand?” “And do you remember them all?” “Of course not!” “Then why bother? What’s the point?” The man thought about it for a moment, then asked, “do you remember every meal you’ve ever eaten?” “No.” “Neither do I,” replied the man. “But I’m sure am glad I ate them.” (UCC Stillspeaking Daily Devotional, Sept. 14, 2009 by Quinn Caldwell).*

Long before this faithful churchgoer was a man named Job who lived in the land of Uz. He was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil (Job 1:1). Back in his day, many in his religious tradition believed *that obedience and faithfulness to God’s precepts, keeping the covenant, would bring prosperity, health, and safety. Disobedience would bring a curse* (New Proclamation Year B). One day, the curse of great suffering fell upon Job. His children died. He lost his wealth. His body was struck down with disease and loathsome sores. His situation was so bad that his wife said to him, “do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die.” But Job answered her, “You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” Then Job sat among the ashes, picked up a potsherd and began to scrape himself. Before long he started wrestling with his friends about religious ideas on why people suffer. Although the conversation with his friends was long and difficult, Job held fast to his integrity. With his friends, instead of blaming and speculating on the causes of suffering, he maintained his

Job 1:1; 2:1-10

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before God, and satan also came among them to present himself before God. The Lord said to satan, “Where have you come from?” Satan answered God, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” God said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.” Then satan answered God, “Skin for skin!” All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch the bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.” God said to satan, “Very well, he is in your power, only spare his life.” So satan went out from the presence of God, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes. Then his wife said to him, “Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.” But he said to her, “you speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?”

Mark 10:2-16

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” He answered them, “What did Moses command you?” They said, “Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.” But Jesus said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, “God made them male and female.” For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces his husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them, and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

innocence. Before God he insisted that God was in charge of everything. Aren't we glad that an ancient community of Hebrew faith told this story of Job over and over again for the reinterpretation of their religious tradition so that, in our tradition of faith we do not blame last week's Indonesian quake, the American Samoan tsunami, AIDS, or the swine flu on various sins and sinners? Aren't we glad that Job persisted in a deeper understanding of his suffering in relation to God and insisted that God speak to him about it? Aren't we glad that Job, *sitting in the ash heap, separated from community and cleanliness, unclean, surrounded by loss, spoke to the Mystery of Life which holds countless undeserved blessings as well as immeasurable, indescribable loss?* (ibid, adapted). After days of wrestling with his friends and with God, Job received a word from the Living God. It was the Eternal Word that gives life in each generation and renews life within each soul. It was the grace filled Word of faith that invites each human heart to trust that God is our Creator and is charge of everything; to trust that God is the Compassionate One who cares about us: and, to trust that God is the Covenantal One who, in every up and down of life, speaks the Word that renews our life.

And, as faithful churchgoers, aren't we glad that Jesus modeled Job's style of prayerful wrestling with his disciples over difficult traditional religious rituals? When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this matter (of divorce and remarriage). Biblical scholars tell us that Jesus took the time with his disciples to discuss a marital practice that was prevalent in the Greco-Roman culture but was not done in ancient Judaism. In his gospel story, Mark has Jesus speaking with his disciples about a wife divorcing her husband. What we find in Jesus' teaching is that he framed the matter in personal rather than legal terms (in Jewish culture a wife was the property of the husband). Biblical commentator Williamson, Jr. noted that: *Jesus, does not legislate by saying 'No remarriage,' but rather he helped his followers recognize what divorce and remarriage do to the residual relationship with a former partner.* He helped them take a look at the many layers of pain, the distrust, and the feelings of abandonment that separation causes.

In addition, Jesus taught them that breaking the marital bond is also a

ritual issue that often causes distrust of God. According to Mark's story, Jesus became indignant when families were bringing their children for healing and his followers tried to stop the children from touching him. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to them as these that the kingdom of God belongs." Richard Swanson noted: *marital ritual of intimacy and support is also figured as field on which encounter God. This is an important understanding, especially because it takes place at the heart of human life. Encounters with God are often imagined as taking place on the edges of existence, in retreat from ordinary life.* However, in marriage, "encounter with God takes place . . . in the midst of the ordinary rituals of daily life" (Provoking the Gospel of Mark). Jesus helped people see that breaking the marital vow often makes it hard for the broken hearted soul to trust that God will be steadfast in love for ever through the ups and downs of life until life's end.

Jesus, in order to reveal the everlasting love of God to distrusting hearts; Jesus took the children up in his arms, laid his hands on them and blessed them (Mark 10:16). In one swooping up embrace, Jesus righted the relationship of hard hearted souls with God. In the embrace, Jesus revealed the unearned grace of God's steadfast presence. In his welcome of the children, he said "no" to religious practices that *drive away rather than welcome, that set strict limits to the grace of God rather than marvel at its superabundance* (Sermon Seeds, 10/2/09). Jesus invited the broken hearted to trust and accompany him in their journey back to the heart of God.

Accompanying those with broken and hardened hearts is one of the things churches do best. The motto for our Crop Walk is, "We walk because we walk." We walk to raise money for women in third world countries who walk miles each day to fill their water jugs for their families. We walk with the townspeople in their efforts to dig a well for their community. We walk with them because Jesus walked with others in the hard issues of life. We walk because Christ accompanies us. It's worldwide communion every day in the church. It's our day to celebrate by opening our arms wide to the glad invitation: Whoever you are, whatever you are, wherever you are on your life's journey, you are welcome here.