

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
October 13, 2024 – 21 Pentecost  
Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Mark 10:17-31  
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

As I said last week, this month we will hear selections from the Book of Job. The readings are brief and taken from various points in the long narrative that makes up the book. Today I want to point out one facet of our reading that you may find applies to your experience. Job has lost his possessions, his family, and his good health, and his so-called friends have told him that he must somehow be responsible for his own calamities. Job knows that he has not caused his misfortune through his own unrighteousness. He wants to confront God with his complaints, but he cannot find God anywhere, and this leads him to despair. Perhaps you have had such an experience. You want to have a conversation with God, you want to express your anger to God and hear God's answers to your troubles, but you cannot find God. This is a very difficult spiritual situation. From the Book of Job – as well as many psalms – we know that we are not alone. This is an experience common to many who trust God but suffer great ills in life. And as further passages from the Book of Job will show, we are meant to continue speaking to God, even when our speech feels like a monologue and God feels far away. We continue to pour out our hearts to God in faith that God will eventually respond, with words perhaps or with a sense of God's presence with us or in some other sign. We persevere in faith.

Now, let's turn to this morning's Gospel reading, what has been called The Parable of the Rich Young Man.

Spiritual growth and development experts recognize that our early experiences with parents or other primary caregivers affect our experience of God significantly and potentially throughout our lives. If you grew up knowing without a doubt that your parents loved you, that you didn't have to earn their love by what you did, what you accomplished, how well you behaved, and if you knew that nothing you did wrong could ever stop their love for you, then you may be able to know and experience God's limitless and ongoing love for you. If so, know yourself to be doubly blessed and be thankful.

To the other extreme, if your parents or other primary caregivers attacked and abused you and there was nothing you could do to stop that, if there was nothing you could do to "earn" their love, no matter how good you were or how much you accomplished, then it is likely that you have great difficulty knowing, feeling and accepting God's love for you. This is a handicap of the spiritual life that may persist throughout your adult years.

Whatever your experience, at either extreme or in between, I think we tend to read this Gospel account of Jesus and the rich young man and hear it this way: the young man tells Jesus, in effect, "I have been good in obeying all these commandments," and then – because he has been good – Jesus loves him. If we read it this way, we get left out of the story, don't we? Because none of us have been that good, have we? Who of us can say that we have always obeyed the commandments of God? Does that mean that Jesus won't love us? I don't think so. That's looking at things the wrong way round.

First Jesus loved and loves every person he meets. That's what we believe to be a "given" of life with God. As we read in the First Letter of John (4:19), "We love God because he first loved us." Jesus loves us. Jesus meets us where we are. And Jesus challenges us to grow, always in the direction of more love, greater connection with God, and more freedom. All from love and for love. That is what we believe and trust in.

We often refer to Jesus as our teacher, Rabbi Jesus. The young man approaches Jesus with the words, "Good Teacher." So, let's think of a dedicated teacher. She or he naturally "loves" the students who are truly interested in the subject being taught and who show promise in learning more. The young man is like a good student. He takes the subject of living according to God's direction seriously. He has potential to go further, so Jesus poses the next "problem" for him, the next step in his life with God. "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, ... then come, follow me." The young man went away then, but I like to think that later he was able to do what Jesus asked and was free to follow Jesus. Jesus, the Good Teacher, is also interested in the students who are struggling with the material. His loving attention is always available to help us master the next step on the path of love. I wonder what Jesus would see in your life and in mine, in your heart and in mine, that would let him know how serious we are in following God's direction and in seeking to follow Jesus.

This leads me to say a few words about parish life. The parish church is a fragile organism. If you think back four or five years in the history of St. Columba's, you will recognize what I mean. The church is fragile, and it is sacred. This is a place where we are meant to live out the promises we made to God in baptism, for instance, the promise to respect the dignity of every human being. I believe strongly that the church should be a safe place for everyone. When we think of safety in church, our minds may go to topics like clergy abuse of parishioners and the safety of children. These aren't live issues here. What I am talking about is each person being safe from unkind words, safe to offer their gifts to God and to the parish in an atmosphere of appreciation, not criticism.

Recently we heard a portion of the Letter of James that reminded us of the danger of the tongue. James wrote, "The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity ... a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (3:6, 8). Very strong words that warn us of the seriousness of using our words in ways that hurt others. Each of us knows from experience in our lives how much a harsh, critical word can hurt and wound us. Lives can be forever changed for the worse by verbal unkindness. Hopefully, we also know from experience in our lives how much words of appreciation and encouragement can support us and keep us going on a good path. Lives can be forever changed for the better by verbal kindness.

We need to remember when we come through the doors of the church that we are part of a fragile organism composed of fragile human beings who are beloved of God. You may not know the troubles in the lives of the people sitting here with you. You may have no idea how hard a person's journey is now or what it took for the person to get here this morning or what battles a person has won to want to praise God or how much a person needs this beautiful hour of prayer and fellowship. We are meant to build up the body of Christ, and this is the body we have been given to build up. This is our sacred responsibility, and I would urge every person here to honor that responsibility at all times.

I want to close by reading you the words of a simple Shaker song called "Gentle Words:"  
What the dew is to the flower, gentle words are to the soul,  
And a blessing to the giver, and so dear to the receiver, we should never withhold.  
Gentle words, kindly spoken, often soothe the troubled mind,  
While links of love are broken by words that are unkind.  
Then O, thou gentle spirit, my constant Guardian be,  
'Do to others,' be my motto, 'As I'd have them do to me.'

For the love of God and for the well-being of our dear church, may we take these words to heart. Amen.