

## **Tough Stuff**

**Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31; Psalm 22:1-15; 10-15-06**

There was a little report on the “Today Show” this past week about the number of CEOs who had been spanked as children. This was not a major in-depth investigation, just something to do with proving that high achievers had not had their psyches permanently damaged by parents who had not gone to extremes to spare the rod.

Most of the CEOs who responded said, “Yes, indeed, they had been paddled a time or two as kids.” Not beaten, just given some firm pats from time to time.

In our day and age it is not considered at all correct to spank a child. In fact, the days of non-spanking were making their first appearance just as the last of my daughters was growing up. I remember very clearly telling the youngest, who knew how to dial 911 and report what she viewed as “child abuse” to anyone who would listen, to please go to her room and get out of my sight after one particularly annoying offense. After noting the look on my face, she stopped reminding me of her two new favorite words, “child abuse,” and retreated quite quickly. She knew if we did not have some time and space between us, there might be some tough stuff coming.

I am not sure, during these rare moments, that she ever felt quite as abandoned by God as did poor, dear Job. She might have, just a little, for like the man from the Bible all she wanted to do was disappear. The difference was that Job was sad and dejected while she was a bit sassy.

Job had a reason to be depressed. God had vanished leaving him to his own defenses against the evil that continued to befall him. It was a dreadful way to learn a lesson. Abandonment always is. Even though we know the story of Job comes out all right, we understand that he needed to go through a process that would lead him to a greater understanding and appreciation of his God.

And then there is our reading from the Letter to the Hebrews. It is not a gentle reading either. It says: “Indeed the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.”

This sharp opening section goes on to tell how blessed we are to have Christ in heaven who understands our weaknesses and our fears. He will intercede for us with God that we all may become one with our Creator once again. The atonement or “at-one-ment.”

We need to remember, as we read this Letter to the Hebrews, a letter some think might have been written by a woman, that it was produced first and foremost to tell its readers about the superiority of the new Way over the old. Some members of their small community might have been taking longing, backward glances at Judaism as they underwent persecution for espousing their new faith. The author was exhorting them to remain faithful and not to fall away. There are times when this letter pounds this point home with great force.

I must have had a Sunday school teacher somewhere along the line who was particularly fond of the opening verses of our reading, for I have always believed that God knows exactly what I am up to at all times and in all places. It’s a little bit like that song, “From a Distance” in which we are reminded that “God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us from a distance.” But, I also know of God’s merciful

forgiveness when the things we do and say and think are far from what is hoped for from us. I understand that we all are forgiven and given yet another chance to make things right again. Thank God, there is always another chance.

After sensing the despair of Job's abandonment and reading the words from Hebrews we might hope to find wonderful, comforting words in the Gospel of Mark. But there is more tough stuff, especially for those considered wealthy. We must feel at least a little pain for the man who approached Jesus and asked what it is he must do to become one of his followers. After assuring Jesus that he had kept all the commandments we learnt that is not enough. We are told that Jesus said that it would be "easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven." The young man needed to go and dispose of all it was he had, give it to the poor and then he could follow Christ. He walked away dejected.

I took a look at the King James Version of this reading in which it says that one must not put one's faith in the riches of this earth but in the treasures of heaven. One must trust in God. This is very hard for us to do. We want to be considered the owners of our own fate. We want to direct our own lives. So, we do. But, often we find that we end up on the wrong pathway. The way that separates us from the will of God, from the basic morality by which we know we should abide. The values of the world have us in their clutches and it is easier to just go along instead of swimming up stream and resisting.

Jesus offered transformation or change to all those who care to follow him. Not only offered it, but required it. This is tough stuff. It is easier to hold on to our old ways of life than to attempt any kind of change. Sometimes we believe that to change we need to take a huge and fearful step in a different direction. But, as I tell you, so often that you would like to throttle me, the most meaningful, lasting change comes through consistent, small steps. It comes through efforts like the conscious decision that we will stop looking at others with the eyes of judgment. We will stop trying to determine whom it is that does not measure up on a human scale or on God's scale. We need to remember that God alone is the final judge of all, as Hebrews tells us, and at the end it is to God we owe an account of how we have lived and moved and had our being.

Change can come when we stop trying to close the doors on new ideas and fresh thought because they do not conform to and enforce our ideas. We die as people and as a community when we stop entertaining the possibly of new ideas and new direction. New ideas bombard us and we must use discretion in selecting those we will champion. But, we must always make room for fresh thought.

Change comes when we stop asking for perfection from others. How many times have I told you we may have "no expectations of others, only hopes." This lessens our disappointment when others cannot possibly live up to what we expect and also keeps us from judging them. Interesting how everything begins to go hand in hand when we actually take the time to think about it. And it all comes back around to the central message of our "good news in Christ."

It all comes around to loving our God and our neighbors as our selves. It is that simple. It is that complex. It is that seemingly gentle stuff but it is also that tough stuff that helps us finally find our way. A way, I believe is found by all of us back into the loving presence of a God who will never let us go. A way found by Job, by the readers of the letter to the Hebrews and even, perhaps, by the rich man. Amen