

October 1, 2006
 Getting Preferential Treatment in the Church
 I Corinthians 12:21-26 / James 2:1-7 / Job 18:1 – 19:22

In relation to this text, one saint has insightfully asked:

“Who is the most important person in a church? Is it the head of the denomination? Is it the local pastor? Is it the person who is most filled with the Holy Spirit? Or how about one of those hard-working deacons, the one who somehow has a hand in everything, and without whose tireless service the whole church would (or so it seems) collapse? Or perhaps the most important person is that unassuming angel of mercy whose humble but towering faith is known to the Lord alone? Or what about the prayer-warrior? Isn't there always one saint who seems more ardently and joyfully committed to prayer than all the rest of the church combined? Isn't he or she the most important?” But no. Oddly enough the answer is ‘none of the above.’ Rather, the answer is this: The most important person in the church is the one who is suffering.”

It's something that should be plain to us merely by looking at the life of Jesus. For you can't watch Him in the Gospels, walking around the dusty roads of Palestine, without seeing that His eyes searched out, and His attention was most often locked in upon, and the thrust of His energies in ministry most often directed at — the poor, hurting, suffering, sick, sorrowing, hungry, oppressed, lame, crippled, deaf, and blind — those with leprosy, epilepsy, or possessed by demons.”

In a very counter-cultural way, Jesus bypassed the people of power, importance, position and prestige — the influential movers and shakers of Jerusalem and Judea — and focused the vast majority of his attention on the outcasts, social misfits, and morally lapsed — “sinners,” like tax-collectors, adulterers, and prostitutes, just to name a few).

WHY? He made it clear many times! As the Savior Sent by the Father, He understood His role as being like that of a “DOCTOR” making a house call to planet earth! And using reasoning that was about as simple and irrefutable as he could, He said: *“It is not the healthy that need a doctor, but the sick”* (Mt 9:12/Mk 2:17/Lk 5:31).

Paul expresses the same type of attitude in I Corinth. 12:21-26, coming at it from a different angle or perspective. There, equating the church to a human body made up of many different parts, he says this:

“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I do not need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with greater honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”

You see, Paul’s perspective is this: In a human body, the greatest care and attention needs to go to the part of the body that is sick or suffering — for until that one part is well, the whole body will continue to suffer. At any given time the most important part of the body is that part which is suffering.

When you go into the hospital (which is, by the way, what the church really is — a spiritual hospital of sorts, and not the local health club!), 95-98% of your body may be healthy and well, and only one insignificant organ or one minor part of your body hurt or injured (like your appendix). Yet that one little sickly part gets all the attention, and the other 95% of your body that is well gets no attention at all! It becomes the most important part of all until it gets well.

And that’s the way it SHOULD be! To focus on the parts of the body that are well, and ignore the parts of the body that are sick or suffering, is unwise, unloving, and can only lead to the decreased health of the body as a whole!

Thus, the message of Jesus and Paul seems pretty clear (though Job’s friends never quite do seem to get it):

In the eyes of God, ministry to the suffering and sorrowing is to be the TOP PRIORITY for the church. Because what the world needs to see is NOT the church courting and catering to those who are well, but the church reaching out to care for those who are sick and suffering.

Yet there's another reason why we should reach out and care for the sick and suffering. It's simply because that's what LOVE will always seek to do. Love always desires, in some tangible way, to alleviate the pain of those who are suffering.

The Apostle John made this clear by using only one of many possible illustrations:

"If anyone has material possessions," he says, "and sees his brother in need, but has no pity on him (if he doesn't see to alleviate his plight) how can the love of God be in him?"

John is merely pointing out what should be plain to all — that anyone who has been filled with the love of God (as all Christians have been according to Romans 5:5), should be moved in some way, by that love to address or alleviate the pain and suffering which some other human being is enduring.

In fact, if we are NOT moved to try and alleviate the pain others are enduring, it is questionable if the love of God can possibly be in us. That's what John says! And if the love of God is not in us, we must ask if we can possibly be Christian, since Paul tells us that at the point of conversion and throughout our lives God, ***"pours His love (His agape) into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which He has given to us"*** who believe.

Now, what I believe we find in today's passage is Job telling us what suffering people need, how we can reach out to them in love, and what we can do to help alleviate their pain. Bildad has done it wrongly.

And so Job tells him (and us) what he as a suffering person needs, when he pleads with all his friends (and not just Bildad) to simply be kind and have pity on him. You can hear the pain and frustration in his voice when in utter exasperation he says to them:

"Have pity on me, my friends, have pity on me, (or, as it could also be translated — 'be merciful to me my friends, show me kindness") for the hand of God has struck me."

And he says it in light of the fact that here he is suffering in unspeakable ways and all they seem to be concerned with is getting him to repent, be more doctrinally accurate in their eyes, and more reverent in his speech. Instead of loving him they subject him in a long drawn-out doctrinal argument!

It's a point that caused D. L. Moody to say in reference to this verse:

"The church has been very jealous (zealous) about men being unsound in the faith. If a man becomes unsound in the faith, they draw their ecclesiastical swords and cut him up. But he may be ever so unsound in love, and they don't say anything."

LISTEN: Contending for the faith "once and forever entrusted to the saints" IS very necessary on occasion — but the bedside of a person suffering in extreme pain is NOT one of those occasions! And if our hearts are filled with the love of God, we should know that! In fact, if we have rightly understood the Bible, it should be clear to us that the suffering person should never have to beg and plead for pity. They shouldn't have to beg their brothers and sisters in Christ to be merciful and kind to them. It should be the instinctual response of a heart into which God has poured out His love.

So, what does Job share that can help us know what suffering people need, how we can reach out to them in love, and what we can do to help alleviate their pain.

FIRST, he wants us to know that most often the suffering person feels cut off from God. They KNOW God is there, like Job does, and may even be more aware of that fact than ever before, yet they feel distant from Him, forsaken by Him, or just plain forgotten — like God is disinterested, and refuses to help or respond to their inner cries, groans or prayers (vv. 7-12)

In contemporary terms, the suffering person **FEELS** like God has taken the phone off the hook, refuses to answer or return their calls, and refuses to act on their behalf. Better yet, they feel as if a group of thugs has broken into their home, are beating them and abusing them while one thug steals all their possessions. They escape to call the police, know the police received and heard the call, but wait in vain for the squad car to show up and help them.

That's the way a suffering person **FEELS**. They don't simply want to know they've been heard, they want a response! They want to see the police drive up, run to their house and apprehend the thugs!

Verse 7: *"Though I cry, 'I've been wronged!' I get no response," says Job.
"Though I call for help, there is no justice."*

That is, no one comes to my aid. And he says it all in relation to God. He knows that God knows, is listening, and aware of all that is happening. In fact, he knows that God is ultimately responsible for what he's going through — it is God that has "wronged him," as he says in verses 6 and 7. The problem is that God simply chooses not to respond to him.

And although what the suffering person REALLY desires and needs is to hear from God, or see God respond in some fashion, there is a sense in which we can also play a part in meeting that need. Because there is an immense amount of human suffering and pain which can be alleviated by US.

I recall seeing a cartoon one time — I think it was of a frog(!) sitting on a lily pad looking up into the sky, and belligerently asking God:

“Why do You allow so much suffering to continue when You have the power to stop it?”

And in the next picture box you see a voice respond from heaven and the voice says:

“Why do you allow so much suffering to continue when you have the power to stop it?”

And in the last box, realizing he’s been bettered, he says something like:

“I hate it when He does that,”
or *“I hate it when He’s right.”*

It’s true though, isn’t it? There IS a sense in which we as God’s people have been commissioned by Him to be His ambassadors in this world — to act in this world on His behalf. For often, the way God speaks to others, and provides for others, is through us! He responds to THEIR prayers, and alleviates THEIR pain, and moves to meet THEIR needs, and by laying it upon OUR hearts to do so!

He uses US as His EYES to see the pain and struggle of others, His EARS to listen to their stories, His MOUTH to speak comfort and encouragement, His HANDS to reach out in kindness, His ARMS to help carry their burden, and His FEET to run to their assistance.

The church is not called the “Body of Christ” for nothing! It’s not by accident that GOD pours HIS love into OUR hearts by the Holy Spirit which he has given to us, so that OUR physical bodies can be MOVED and ANIMATED by HIS affectionate concern, and mercy, and compassion, and kindness and pity. That’s what a Christian is, is it not? ***A person possessed by the Spirit of God, who in turn fills their heart with the love of God.***

Then **SECOND**, Job wants us to know that the suffering person not only feels alienated from God, but often feels alienated from people as well. And often, it’s not simply that he or she simply “feels” that way. Such feelings can be a wrong estimation of the situation, and even border on paranoia if the suffering is intense enough, but it can also be little more than an accurate estimation based on the plain facts — as in Job’s case.

In verses 13-19 Job says that his friends and acquaintances; intimate friends and relatives and servants; little children, his own brothers and even his wife have forgotten him, forsaken him, loathe him, detest him, have turned against him, ridicule him and find him offensive. And who could blame them? In verse 17 he says the smell of his breath was offensive. He is nothing but skin and bones (verse 20a).

As Frances Anderson puts it, he is "a horror of emaciation and ugliness." He looked like the starving people you see in photos of the concentration camps in Germany, or the famines in Africa. And in verse 20b he says (literally in the Hebrew) "*I have escaped with only my gums.*" (See the NIV footnote at bottom of page) That is, all his teeth, or nearly all of his teeth had apparently fallen out by this point in time.

Which means it would have been HARD for any person to even look at Job, never mind want to get close to him. He must have looked monster-like and frightful to see — like some-thing out of a horror movie:

Infected boils and scabs all over his body (2:7-8), his skin cracked, and festering, with worms eating his flesh (7:5), his teeth falling out, his breath repulsive, and his body nothing but skin and bones – like a walking skeleton.

Which only increased his agony. Because at this time in his life, when he needed love and physical affection and caring attention the most, his appearance, and the oozing condition of his flesh, the smell of his body and breath made it nearly impossible for anyone to want to. Even the most merciful and empathetic saint (even a Mother Teresa or her Sisters of Charity) would have had to force themselves to do it.

Now, of course, his condition is probably unequalled in the annals of history. The fact that he even survived is absolutely amazing. But what is true of Job in the extreme, is also true of others to a much lesser degree. Their suffering makes them feel rejected by people at the very time they need people's acceptance the most.

I've seen it with AIDS victims, people in nursing homes, institutions for the mentally handicapped, or those who lost limbs in the war. They want love, and need love, but their condition makes it hard for people to give them love.

And suffering people feel it. They feel lonely, alienated, like they're a burden, like no one wants them around, or wants to hear about their struggles, or be strapped and imposed upon by the financial and time constraints their physical ailments, mental state or emotional problems place on others.

And its heightened by the fact that people used to be sick at home, cared for at home, give birth at home, grow old at home, and die at home! Not any more. Nowadays all that happens AWAY from the home — only increasing the sense of alienation and separation the suffering person often feels.

In fact, I'll never forget one of my first visits to a nursing home in New Bedford, Massachusetts just after seminary. I was walking down the hall to visit one of my parishioners when a man in a wheelchair grabbed my arm with both hands, pulled me close, and pleadingly, with tears in his eyes, said:

“Please sir, I'll give you anything you want if you'll just get me out of here. Please, anything, I'll give you anything!”

I remember thinking about it for weeks — yet unable to really do anything about it. Which is why Mike Mason's point is helpful when he says: “The most precious service we can perform for another person is not to free him from a problem, but to love him in it, for *“love covers a multitude of sins”* (I Peter 4:8).

Which brings me to my **LAST** point. As Job tells us in this passage (and throughout this book) and both Jesus and the Apostle Paul confirm in the NT, one of the primary forms of godly service that any Christian can render to another, is the service of kindness, mercy or pity to those who are suffering or in pain.

But it's not just loving service rendered to the suffering. In reality it is loving service rendered to Jesus Himself in the suffering. As Jesus tells us in Matthew 25:40: *“I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me”* (not “for me,” as in the NIV).

Speaking of the suffering, He says: *“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”* Which means that to minister kindness and mercy to those in pain, IS to minister to Jesus Himself!

THINK OF IT: If Jesus were in a nursing home, would you not rush to minister to Him and spend time with Him? If He were in the hospital would you not be there by His bedside? If He were without food, or cold and naked, would you not rush to feed and clothe Him? Well, says Jesus, look around you — because He's there — in the hurting, suffering, and lonely people of the world.

You know, so often I hear people on the weekends say, *“There’s nothing to do.”* And given the fact that we live in an entertainment driven or entertain me society, it’s not hard to realize what they mean: *“There’s nothing to do that will entertain me.”* (as if the weekly goal in life is to be entertained!)

Yet it’s an odd statement for a Christian to make, when 60% of the people around us don’t know Jesus. **NURSING HOMES** are full of lonely people who rarely get visited. **HOSPITALS** are full of people struggling with illness—some terminal. **PRISONS** are full of people who need to hear the message of God’s forgiveness and transformation. **SOUP KITCHENS** and **CLOTHING BANKS** and **HABITAT FOR HUMANITY** and **INNER CITY MISSIONS** are always looking for volunteers.

And yet we hear Christians of all ages say on a regular basis: “There’s nothing to do.”

The reality is that there’s so much to do it should make our head swim! And not just do it, or do it for Jesus, but do it to Jesus, who assures us that whatever we do for the suffering and forgotten; the poor and the downtrodden; the sick and the lonely — we have done it unto Him. And not only that, we have brought glory unto Him.

You see, doctrinally, in some places, I may not be on the same page as Mother Teresa. But in terms of her priorities and life-style, she puts me and many other evangelicals like me to shame. In fact, she, and now her order—The Missionaries of Charity—stand as a prophetic rebuke to much of the frivolous activity that goes on in the church, by their relentless desire to minister to the suffering people of the world.

In fact, let me close with an extensive quote by Mother Teresa, which I offer as a challenge to all of us here today—myself included. They were words spoken to the man who wrote her biography (please listen carefully):

“Tell them,” she said, “tell them that we are not here for the work, we are here for Jesus. All we do is for Him. We are first of all religious; we are not social workers, not teachers, not nurses or doctors, we are religious sisters. We serve Jesus in the poor. We nurse Him, feed Him, visit Him, comfort Him in the poor, the abandoned, the sick, the orphans, the dying. But all we do, our prayer, our work, our suffering is for Jesus. Our life has no other reason or motivation. This is a point many people do not understand. I serve Jesus twenty-four hours a day, whatever I do is for Him. And He gives me strength. I love Him in the poor and the poor in Him. But always the Lord comes first. Whenever visitors come to this house, I take them to the chapel to pray for a while. I tell them, “Let us first greet the Master of the house. Jesus is here. It is for Him we work, to Him we devote ourselves. He gives us the strength to

carry on this life and to do so with happiness. Without Him we could not do what we do; we certainly could not continue doing it for a lifetime. One year, two years, perhaps; but not during a whole life, without thought of reward, without expectation of anything good except to suffer with Him who loved us so much that He gave His life for us. Without Jesus our life would be meaningless, incomprehensible. Jesus explains our life... tell them WE DO IT FOR JESUS."

Imagine how differently people would perceive Christianity if all Christians had the same priority, and goal, and desire to live for Jesus.

The world would be quite the different place, and people would have a hard time finding fault with Jesus, the Church, or the preaching of the Gospel — if that's what it produced!