

## To Whom Does God's Kingdom Belong?

JOB 1: 1-2, 2: 1-10; MARK 10: 2-16

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time • October 3, 2021

by Pat Berger

How many of us, as we watched various news shows this week, thought about how fortunate we are? Many people in way too many other places in our world -- Haiti, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Portland -- I could go on and on but I won't -- deal with conditions that we can't really imagine. Nicholas Kristof once wrote that it isn't that the rest of us are better, or smarter, or more virtuous than these people; it is just that we are luckier (and let me add here that, yes, I do know that Presbyterians don't believe in luck, but that is the term that Mr. Kristof used).

And then we start hearing the story of Job this week, too, and it doesn't take much imagination for us to feel fortunate again. Job is a man who, we are told, is blameless and upright, which can also be translated, absolutely innocent. Still, one day God and the Satan have a strange little chat about Job and whether or not he might behave as well as he does only because God has been so very good to him, and the result is that God tells the Satan that he can have his way with Job, only just don't touch him. It is important for us to remember that "the Satan" here is not yet, as one writer put it, the "diabolical opponent of God's righteous purposes," and one way that that distinction is made clear is that in the Hebrew text, the word used for Satan translates as, "the Satan." At this point in our story, the Satan worked for God; the Satan was one of God's employees. So, God wanted to know, what had the Satan been up to?

Well, since you asked, between the verses that Wendy read in chapter 1 and the verses where she continued in chapter 2, Job had witnessed the deaths of his livestock, his servants, and all ten of his children. Job couldn't have been feeling fortunate; he may have felt, as Greg Love wrote, that God might not know the route but definitely knows The End, and just before our verses in chapter 2, the Biblical writer says, "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrongdoing." In the next three weeks, we will hear more from Job's friends and from Job and from God; today it seems we are only introduced to this man who responded faithfully, incident after incident, seemingly regardless of what obstacles the Satan put in his path. In a world where most thought God was all about punishment and reward, Job heard, in ways that those around him simply did not, a God who said, "I am with you; I want to be in relationship with you." We need to stay tuned.

Those who first listened to Jesus were the beneficiaries of God's efforts to be with the divinely created children, and to be in relationship with them, too. God gave the Son Jesus for that relationship. The Pharisees in our reading from Mark have on their minds to test Jesus about another relationship: is a man permitted to divorce his wife? In order for us to hear this correctly, we need to remember some things about marriage in Jesus' day.

One writer put it this way: ". . . marriages were between families. . . . union . . . was intended to bind the families together . . . children in this culture could not choose their marriage partners. God chose one's parents, and through one's parents God chose one's marriage partner." Divorce, then, did not just separate two people, but also two families. And since this was an honor/shame culture, the woman's family would be shamed (the man's family could not be shamed), and especially the woman's male relatives would be shamed, and

bloodshed would be the inevitable consequence of that -- so divorce would not be a good thing and needed to be avoided. No divorce.

As for the woman, economic hardship was bound to follow, and she and her children had very limited prospects for their futures. No divorce. There was no alimony or legal recourse; women and children were dependent upon a husband for everything. In case of divorce, if a woman (and her children, if there were children) could not return to her father's house, they might likely be left without anything, and with no way to get food or housing or anything. No divorce.

Children at that time and in that culture had no means of survival without parents or some other adult. They were entirely dependent upon -- upon someone. Many children at that time did not survive to become adults, and adults who didn't care, who could not be depended upon, were a very real part of that. No divorce.

The fact that the writer of the Gospel of Mark goes then straight to talking about welcoming children most likely indicates his feeling for those marginalized by that society: children, and in this case children as stand-ins for women who for whatever reason weren't married. It was these to whom the Kingdom belonged. Again, God might not know the route, but God does know The End: it is these to whom the Kingdom belongs.

On this World Communion Sunday, then, and the Sunday on which we gather our offerings for the Peace and Global Witness Offering, how does all of this impact us? I think it has to do with that word lucky or fortunate, to which I will now add the words "gratitude" and "grateful." We can be, must be, grateful to live in a place in God's world where we can take it for granted that education is available;

774 million people in the world are illiterate, and 2/3 of those are women. Physical abuse of women in developing countries ranges up to 70% in Ethiopia and Peru. We can be grateful that we know The One God, who still seeks to be in relationship with each of the divinely beloved and created children; and we can be grateful for capacity and opportunities to give to those whose circumstances are not as easy to be grateful for as are ours. Our stewardship drive is coming right up, too, and we can be grateful to be able to promise dollars to the general mission of the Presbyterian Church, and to special mission offerings, as well as the dollars that we can promise for this church and for local projects. Our dollars, and those from all of the other Presbyterian churches, add up to millions of dollars that the church sends to every bit of God's creation to make life better for those who are in need. And because we know that none of this is because we are better or smarter or more virtuous than anyone else, we can be humbled by the knowledge that we are amongst the least of these. And to such does the Kingdom of God belong. We want to be grateful for that, too. Perhaps this gratitude will be the starting point for all that we may have the opportunity to do with God and for God in the coming year.

Let us pray.