

Sue Taylor

WISDOM IN RIGHT RELATIONSHIP -SERMON - 22/10/06

Scriptures: Job 38:1-7, 34-41

Mark 10: 35-45a

The scriptures that we heard this morning are often referred to in situations that give us grief. I'm sure that most of you recognize them quite readily. They address some of the major questions of meaning that we ask about life and ask of God. They are questions that hang heavily in our hearts and push the peace from our spirits.

Job asks that huge question of God that is always writ large "WHY" ? I doubt if there is one person here who has not asked that question and if I directly asked you about times that you have asked it the answer would quickly be scurrying through your mind and heart and come to consciousness. We may, like Job have asked it out of a great sense of powerlessness; it may come from profound grief in the face of tragedy and natural disaster; it may come in an angry response to injustice. It may come tumbling out in a cry of anguish. It may come out in an enraged shaking of one's fist at God and at the world. It may also be heard in the sad and confused barely audible cry for help.

Job has boldly challenged God and has not done so without fear of what God's response might be. But God's response was unpredictable - God did not seek to crush or rebuke him, but to question him.

Gutierrez, a Latin American priest and Liberation Theologian has written a wonderful book on Job , particularly in relation to the preferential option for the poor and the prophetic nature of God. He identifies the theme of God's response as emphasizing , and I quote" the plan of God, which enfolds and gives meaning to God's creative

work...Job has been questioning the intentions or plan of God...and had expressed doubt about God's justice and Gutierrez states: "God's plan has its origin in the gratuitousness of creative love...the doctrine of retribution is not the key to understanding the universe...God's love operates in a world not of cause and effect but of freedom and gratuitousness". Job had his perspective turned upside down so that he could understand a new perspective and meaning of life. He was learning the wisdom of God that is experienced in right relationship to God, creation, others and within himself. He could move from a penal worldview to one of grace that enfolds him. "He was not required to deny his suffering but to open himself to the suffering of others and commit himself to its elimination. In a second and later response to Job "God situates justice within the framework of God's gratuitous love". On that note I would like to shift from Job and Gutierrez to the gospel of Mark.

Jesus had been teaching and healing and since the time of the feeding of the five thousand he had been trying to prepare the disciples for what lay ahead for him and for them. Here we have James and John asking for positions of power, in the hierarchical understanding of power -somehow having missed what Jesus had been modeling for them about the nature of the shalom kingdom grounded in the gratuitous, compassionate love of God. The modeling of inclusivity and equality of all. The other ten disciples were furious -likely because these two had cornered Jesus first! There is certainly frustration in Jesus' voice as he tells them that they have no idea what they are asking!

Robert Capon in his book "The Parables of the Kingdom" talks about Jesus having "second thoughts about the style in which he was exercising power

( particularly after the feeding of the 5000)and especially how that style might easily give people the impression he was engaged in little more than a patch job on the world...(after the feeding of the 5000) he had a much firmer grip on the truth that the Messiah was not going to save the world by miraculous band-aid interventions. Rather it was going to be saved by means of a deeper, darker, left-handed mystery, at the center of which lay his own death".

Jesus called the disciples and reminded them that they were not to be like the Gentiles whose rulers and leaders were tyrants and oppressors. Rather, anyone that wished to be great must be a servant among you, for the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve. Jesus was talking about (as Capon notes)"a paradoxical exercise of power-a 180 degrees away from the straight line variety. Capon has a long discussion of "left-handed power that is guided by the more intuitive, open and imaginative right side of the brain". It is a shared and relational power that we strive to model in diaconal ministry. We call it the power of dancing Sarah's circle as opposed to climbing Jacob's ladder. These are not new terms to First United. It is a power with, that opens doors of inclusivity and creativity in relationship as opposed to power over that can so easily be exclusive and destroy relationships.

So Jesus is talking about a different power than was the hierarchical norm of the society of his day and we know that it certainly is different than the norm of our day where nations are locked in devastating and violent wars of power and control in which there can never be lodged justice that is grounded in the framework of God's creative love. A love that is all about relational shared and equal empowering of one another that makes up community.

My roots, as a diaconal minister go deep into the roots of the deaconess order - an order based on the servanthood, non-hierarchical ministry of Jesus. I want to stress that I am talking servanthood and not servitude and there is a vast difference. The deaconess order carried a heavy workload and growth in numbers during the rapid expansion of the United Church following the war years and into the 60's. They were poorly paid and with a poor pension. Not until 1968 was there recognition of diaconal ministers as members of the Order of Ministry and not until 1977 were they subject to the same salaries and personnel policies as ordained ministers. We have chosen to be commissioned to our ministries, as opposed to being ordained, to respect our history and honour the non-hierarchical nature of diaconal ministry.

The first ordained woman minister, Lydia Gruchy was ordained in 1936 in Saskatchewan, but those early women had difficulty finding placements and it wasn't until 1975 and into the 80's that the growth in numbers of women entering Theological college and ordained ministry really began to expand rapidly and begin to change the face and practice of ministry.

This is a very brief overview of women in ministry that evolved slowly and in painstaking struggle in a male dominated church. Before the early 1960's, women who were in ministry either deaconesses or ordained, were removed from ministry if they chose to marry. In the case of a deaconess they were subject to "the Disjoining Rule" and had to return their deaconess pin. Similar wording was not used for the ordained, but they too, had to resign from ministry.

It was certainly an expectation or norm of society at that time that women who married, which was their "real" calling were expected to be at home to look after husband, hearth, home and children. The label "sexism" was barely used at that time. It is interesting that the restriction on the employment of married women in the Federal Public Service was lifted in 1955 and most other professions prior to the 1960's. The church lagged behind. Caryn Douglas, Principal of the Centre for Christian Studies, the theological college providing education for diaconal ministry, wrote "Hundreds of women were made invisible to the church through disjoining". She also told of one woman "who was disjoined twice; reinstated while her husband was overseas in the war; she was disjoined again when he returned". One woman wrote: "I put to use the skills learned...as a volunteer...but it did cut me off from salaried employment , pension and benefits , I was also disconnected from my classmates and other women in ministry." The gifts and skills of others were simply lost by the church.

A petition came to the 38<sup>th</sup> General Council that a way be found to apologize to these women affected by the disjoining rule. It was moved and carried "that General Council find a way, on our behalf to offer our sincere regret to these women and express our sorrow for the loss of their leadership in the church".

Caryn Douglas writes: "At the April 2006 General Council Executive meeting , the church formally acknowledged its wrongdoing in an apology to the women." A small number of women were invited to represent those who were affected. Marion Kirkwood wrote: "The apology itself was embedded in a liturgical act of prayer, in which we were all invited to participate. That felt a bit awkward - almost as if I was apologizing to myself".

These were those embedded words:

We grieve over our limited and culturally conditioned vision of the women's call to serve You. We are sorry for the policies and practices, which denied their ministry and gifts. We repent of the injustices that left many women unemployed, in poverty, and shut out from the courts. We recant sexism that continues to creep quietly and steadily into our views and practices towards women generally and women in ministry.

As a diaconal minister I heard about this service of apology. I also learned that it was not, in any way that I could uncover, made known at the 39<sup>th</sup> General Council this last August. That somehow seems to make it feel invisible to the church as a whole and incomplete as an apology to those women affected.

Another woman present asked many key questions that remain even though this apology was "a step in affirming the ministry of women" - questions of support for women in the structures of the church, putting forward diaconal ministry as a valid choice for potential candidates, using labels of senior and associate minister, with "no sense of the importance of true team ministry;... are we affirming women of visible minorities, or of women with disabilities." Most importantly she asked "What are we doing today, that is unfair, prejudicial, insensitive, unloving?" That question we all need to ask of the church in general.

Our UC has long struggled to make our apology to native peoples around the loss of their culture, spirituality and dignity in the residential schools, a profound reality in our church life and in theirs.

Our church has led many changes in inclusivity in the broader Christian church , among them encouraging affirming congregations -affirming of all sexual orientations and welcoming of all people, and supporting same sex marriage. However, we all know that the practices are painfully slow to catch up to the policies. Caryn Douglas in reflecting on Persons' Day and the Famous Five said " I come away thinking about the dance we do as followers of Jesus to be proponents of the church we often know to be liberating and life-giving, but we also know can be a place where injustice is perpetrated." There is noticeable slippage in the norms of our church and our Canadian society as we see the structural supports of advocacy, equality and education pulled. I refer to the loss of the national church Committee on Diaconal Ministry and the dismantling of the Federal Government's Status of Women Canada. Let us not forget that " the gratuitous love of God is the framework within which the requirement of practicing justice is to be located". It is there that the wisdom of right relationship is found.

In the final stanzas of our new United Church "Song of Faith" we hear "Divine creation does not cease until all things have found wholeness, union, and integration with the common ground of all being...Grateful for God's loving action, we cannot keep from singing. Creating and seeking relationship, in awe and trust, we witness to Holy Mystery who is Wholly Love." So be it. Amen