TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

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##### *“Sharing the Struggles”*

 **I would like to begin this sermon with an expression of deep gratitude to this congregation for the love and the care that has been showered upon me as I went through the whole saga of having hip replacement surgery, and “yes,” by the time I actually did have the surgery on September 23rd, it had become something of a saga.**

**Thank you for your prayers, your gifts, your texts, cards, emails, and…and mostly, thank you for your *patience*!—especially your patience as I (and you) endured no less than three delays, all of which took-up a whole year of waiting and planning…and then re-making plans, and lots more waiting!**

**But it is done now and I am pain-free, and am moving closer to having full use of my right leg again.**

**Thank you—I could not have gotten through it without you all.**

**Having said that—and I am completely sincere about the importance and the precious gift of your prayers and concern—but having confessed to you their great importance to my recovery and well-being, I must also confess that I was often tempted to go without these gifts. I was tempted to hide my need for your concern — even if my need was only temporary. I was tempted to hide my need even for your prayers.**

**No one likes to be vulnerable. Few of us willingly admit that we need help—even when it is kindly offered. I am no different. Indeed, if the hospital had not insisted on there being someone to take me home after the surgery, I might even have attempted to drive myself home even with a right leg that is still regaining flexibility.**

**Luckily for me (and my pride), right after the surgery was over, I flunked waking-up. That is: the anesthesia took longer to wear off, and when the nurses tried to stand me up and get me to walk, I was not able to do so and had to be put back to bed. The next day, the doctor decided that it would be best if I went to the rehab hospital.**

**There, too, I was given the great gift of constant care and attention. What is more, I came to admit—even to myself—just how much I did need the extra help—even when it came to the more personal elements of daily living (like bathing).**

**What I learned was an old truth that most of us know, but which is continually obstructed by our old friend known as “pride” which is that we all need help at some point in our lives—at quite a few points. We really are not islands alone, and unto ourselves. We are embedded in the web of life, and there is little good that comes from denying it.**

**Most of us have a very hard time with pride. We call it “preserving our dignity” and it is, and self-esteem is an important part of well-being. However, sometimes, I would even say, *often* we take so many precautions about our “dignity” that we deprive ourselves, and our family and friends, from drawing close when we are in need, preferring to “suffer in silence.”**

**Sometimes, we even deprive ourselves the love and companionship of God, and that is a real and deep kind of suffering that can destroy our life, and our very souls.**

**Our friend, in today’s Bible passage, Job, is a challenging but helpful example of what I mean.**

**Job’s ordeal was, of course, very public. The extent of his loss was so great that he could not have hidden it even if he had wanted to. All of this herds and his home are destroyed. That was loss enough for anyone. Then, all of his children are also destroyed. That was not just a loss, that was a tragedy on an unimaginable scale. After all of this, the only thing he had left was his health, and that too was destroyed as boils covered his body from head to foot.**

**The way Job processes all of this heartbreak—the conversations he has with his wife, and the four friends who come to “console” him and mock him at equal turns, take us through an intricate and expansive examination of the nature of life, and our relationship with God.**

**Job’s story asks much of us. Finally, after all of his arguing with the four friends and his wife, after calling out to God and demanding an answer, Job gets his audience with God. However, God does not explain nor does God enlighten Job about what has been happening to him, but rather explicates divine power as the context for the human condition and experience. Having done this, God restores Job to health and wealth.**

**Does this make-up for all that he has lost?** The text does not suggest that Job accepts it as such. He does not throw up his hands and simply welcome the replacements—as if new children could ever replace the ones that were destroyed.

What Job does—what he has done throughout the many chapters of the book that bears his name, is he accepts the care and attention of his family and friends—the community who is aware of his journey thanks to his transparent sharing of his struggle. Despite a good deal of wrongheadedness and aggravation Job’s four friends brought with them, neither they nor he withdraw from each other. Neither does Job give up on calling out to God and demanding an answer.

In Job’s suffering and continued faith, there is a witness that reaches even those who previously judged or mocked him. We are often reminded of the patience of Job. Well, I do not really believe he was terribly patient. He was, however, persistent. He consistently held on to his relationship with God, consistently believed that there was more to his story with God than destruction and suffering, and he did this by being very open about what he had gone through and what he needed.

There are many lessons we can learn from the Job’s story, not the least of which is that Job was not hesitant about sharing his struggles. He was not afraid to be honest and vulnerable—even with God.

So, here are some things that I believe we can draw from this story, and a couple of things I hope you will consider with me this next week. The first thing I would like us to do is to think about the number of times in your life—the number of times in our lives, the many years in which you were the strong, even the *proud* caretaker of all the others in your life—your spouse, your children, extended family, friends, church family, broader community.

What I would like for us to do is to remember all those years and experiences. Give thanks for those and remember with gratitude how glad you were to offer all that you did. After you do that, I would like you to think about the many people who are waiting for you to accept their offer of a little help, a little more caring.

What I would like to suggest is that accepting the love of God as it is channeled to you through family and friends is a gift that you give just as much as it is a gift you receive.

The second thing I would like us all to think about is to consider the accessibility and invitational welcome of our church and church-life.

As we move deeper into our life as a missional church we will be called upon to assess over and over again to examine our openness to new people and situations that will not be familiar to us. One of the measures of our faith and commitment will be in the attention we are willing to pay to things like the use of language, our desire to understand another person (and even groups of peoples’) and their cultures and experiences—their challenges and their suffering.

Can we and will we be humble enough—like Job—and listen to their stories and their desire for inclusion, care, and justice?

I would also like us to meditate on the thought that there will be people for whom we will not be equipped to minister to their specific needs. How shall we still meet them and minister to them with the resources that we do have? As one pastor has asked her congregation: “where might we practice a vulnerability or increased transparency that can allow for the building of mutually compassionate relationships with others, one grounded in accompaniment rather than saviorism?”

In other words, will we be like Jesus, will we walk with others? Will we open our hearts and minds to hear others’ stories of challenge and suffering so that we might accompany them in their quest for a lasting justice? Or will we simply practice charity that addresses only the situation, and overlooks the root cause of suffering?

Friends, Job suffered deeply, even shockingly, but not alone. He was never alone. Neither are we. Neither should anyone be—especially while there are people who worship a God who never lets us go, but joins us even in the hardest moments of our lives, who offers God’s strength and presence and promise of unfailing love.

As for me, let me close by saying again how much your love and care and patience have meant to me. Thank you. God bless you, and may God always bless us all with such patience and love for one another. Amen.