

When we began the season of Lent 39 days ago (not counting Sundays), on Ash Wednesday, we remembered that we are dust and to dust we shall return. Today, on the second to last day in Lent, we have gone full circle. Lent began with big ugly black ash crosses drawn on our foreheads and today Lent ends with an equally big black cross-shaped shadow drawn over our lives.

In the midst of this most true, stark, and arresting reality, what does Jesus have to say to us today?

The verses for our meditation this evening comes from Job 42:7-9, the epilogue of the Book of Job.

Here's the reading...

<sup>7</sup> After the LORD had said these things to Job, he said to Eliphaz the Temanite, "I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has. <sup>8</sup> So now take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly. You have not spoken the truth about me, as my servant Job has." <sup>9</sup> So Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite did what the LORD told them; and the LORD accepted Job's prayer.

"My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly" (Job 42:8).

In 1882, a New York City businessman named Joseph Richardson owned a narrow strip of land. It was 5 feet wide and 104 feet long. Another businessman, Hyman Sarnar, owned a normal-sized lot adjacent to Richardson's skinny one. Sarnar wanted to build an apartment that fronted the avenue and offered Richardson \$1,000 for the slender plot. Richardson was offended by the amount and demanded \$5,000. Sarnar

refused and Richardson called Sarner a tightwad and slammed the door on him.

Sarner assumed the land would remain vacant and instructed the architect to design the apartment building with windows overlooking the avenue. When Richardson saw the finished building, he resolved to block the view. No one was going to enjoy a free view over his lot.

So Joseph Richardson built a house. Five feet wide and 104 feet long and four stories high. The house was so narrow that only one person at a time could use the staircase. The largest table in any room was 18 inches wide.

It was said that a newspaper reporter of some girth once got stuck in the stairwell and after two tenants were unsuccessful in pushing him free, he got out only by stripping down to his undergarments. People called the building “The Spite House.” In your sermons notes, I have given you a picture of a similar spite house.

The Spite House was torn down in 1915, which is odd—very odd. Because I distinctly remember spending a few nights there some time ago. And, if memory serves me, I think I saw you squeezing through the hallways.

The spite house is a lonely house isn't it? There's only space enough for one person. And people who live in the spite house are reduced to one goal: make someone miserable. They usually do. Who is that person? Themselves.

Counting today, we have now had eight sermons delivered on the book of Job. And if anybody had a reason to live in the spite house, with large mortar walls of animosity and resentment, it was Job.

Living directly to his right was his wife. Job had lost everything and so did she. If anyone should have understood his pain it was her. But then

his wife said, “Job you should curse God and die.” If Job doesn’t already feel abandoned, you know he does the minute his wife tells him to pull the plug and be done with it.

If that’s not bad enough, there was Eliphaz the Arrogant, who said in Job 4:7 that the upright never perish and in Job 4:8 that “those who sow trouble reap it”. Both verses imply that Job is getting from God exactly what he deserved.

Now add to that Bildad the Brutal’s comments. Because he says in Job 8:4, “Your children sinned against God, so he gave them over to the hand of their transgression.” For Bildad the only explanation for the tragic death of Job’s children is because they sinned against God.

Now, let’s not forget Zophar the Zealot. He adopts, like the others, an aloof, stoic attitude toward Job’s suffering and grief.

The people I just named never address God; and above all, they never pray to God for Job. And in Job 11:6 they all agree that it is surprising that Job doesn’t suffer more. For what Job needs to do is stop claiming that he is righteous in God’s sight and, instead, repent.

There are few experiences in life that are more painful than being rejected by friends and family members who should understand and sympathize with you.

We wouldn’t be shocked if Job decided to build a spite house and live in it the rest of his life. But, wonder of wonders, in our text from Job 42:8 God says, “My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly.” In Job 42:7–8, Job is called “servant” four times—four times! What does God’s servant do? He prays for people.... more than that, he intercedes for his enemies. He blesses those who cursed him. He forgives those that lie to him. He doesn’t return evil for evil. Although Job is still a broken man, still

scraping his boils with pieces of broken pottery, he refuses to unleash weapons of revenge.

You understand, don't you? That all of this foreshadows and previews the greatest act of forgiveness. If anybody—and I mean anybody—had a reason to live in a spite house with large re-enforced walls of animosity and resentment, it was . . . Jesus.

I imagine the lot adjacent to Jesus would be Judas. Judas was Jesus' friend and disciple. He had followed Jesus for three year. Then in the garden he betrayed Jesus not with a dagger but with a kiss.

Another neighbor would have been most certainly been Peter. Jesus told Peter you will deny me three times before the morning. Ironically, Peter even denied that. Following that, Jesus' other so called friends scattered.

Other neighbors would have been the chief priests and scribes. They had paid Judas to betray Jesus. They sent temple soldiers to arrest Christ in Gethsemane, brought his case before Pilate, and stirred up the crowd to demand that Jesus be crucified and Barabbas be let free.

And then there were the Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees and Sadducees were trained in the Bible and they should have been the first to identify Jesus as the Messiah. Instead they were the first to actively plot his death. Finally, after Jesus overturned tables in the temple on Monday of Holy Week, the Sadducees and Pharisees join together in the plan to murder Christ, at any cost, and they did four days later.

But let's not forget the Roman soldiers. They brutally butchered Jesus at Golgotha; placed a crown of thorns on his head; cast lots for his clothing, struck him in the face with their fists; spit upon him, railed insults at him and finally, with three nails, the Roman soldiers crucified him.

Add to the list Pontus Pilate who had found Jesus innocent. Yet, because of Jewish pressure the Roman governor sentenced Jesus to crucifixion and then publicly washed his hands. What a crass, non-bipartisan, two-faced act of betrayal, if there ever was one!

But that's not all, finally we have the crowd. On Sunday the crowd was chanting Jesus' name. Now they are chanting the name of Barabbas. Give us Barabbas, the thief and rebel... and crucify Jesus.

That's quite a list, wouldn't you agree? But it's missing something. There are other notorious sinners that Christ could have, and should have, had huge amounts of spite toward. And who are those people? Brace yourselves. You and I are on the list. Our sins sent Jesus to the cross—our corruption, our pride, and our pettiness.

Luckily for all of us, what does Jesus say? On the cross Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Like Job, or maybe the other way around, Jesus interceded for his enemies. He blessed those who cursed him. He didn't return evil for evil. On Good Friday Jesus became a broken man. He hung in pain and misery. Yet he still refuses to unleash his weapons of revenge. Jesus refused to live in the spite house. How about you?

Oh, I know. It's so easy to hold on to raw anger and bitter resentment. I know... I know... He treated you like trash. She left you in the dust when you needed her the most. Your so called friends and family let you down in the most crucial moments of your life. I know.

You can flee, fight, or forgive. Some opt to flee: to get out of the relationship and start again elsewhere, though they are often surprised when things go sour, again.

Others fight. Their houses become combat zones, and offices become boxing rings, and tension becomes a way of life.

Still others choose to forgive, forget, move on. Where do they get that power? In the words of Jesus, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Does that make forgiveness easy? No. Quick? Seldom. Painless? I don’t think so.

But stay the course. Because I can tell you thing, spending less time in the spite house and more time in the grace house, will be good for you. And as one who has walked the hallways of both, I can guarantee that you’re going to love the space of grace. And you can stay in it as long as you like... because of Jesus. “Father, forgive them. They know not what they do.”

In the grace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, even today, Amen.