

“Gaining Years”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
October 27, 2024 - Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

[Job 42:1-6, 10-17; Mark 10:46-52](#)

As I was at the doctor’s office recently, undergoing an annual physical exam, I was told by the physician that I had both “lost and gained” since last year’s exam. Wanting to hear the bad news first, I asked what I had lost. Apparently, I am now two millimeters shorter than I was last year, so I had lost some height, which, I was told, was unfortunate but normal. Relieved that the bad news was no worse than this, and looking forward to hearing some good news, I asked what I had gained since last year. The answer: I had gained several pounds of weight, and I should probably reduce my chocolate consumption, which was definitely not good news!

The truth is that we all do experience gains and losses in our lifetimes, and sometimes these losses can be much greater than just losing a bit of height, and the even the gains can be negative and worse than adding a couple of unwanted pounds of weight. But in all of our gains and losses, even those that are most difficult for us to deal with, we can experience God’s life-giving grace.

In today’s scripture lessons, we heard stories about characters who had themselves experienced God’s grace amidst their losses and gains.

Our first lesson from the book of Job concludes our month-long journey through that book which tells the story of a man who had lost and gained much. The story begins with its main character Job, who was an upright and faithful person and enjoyed having a large family, great wealth, and perfect health, until he faced terrible circumstances and all of these were taken away from him. He experienced tragic loss after tragic loss after tragic loss until he was alone, sitting in the dust, covered with painful sores, wondering why things went so wrong for him. In his distress, some friends came to visit with him and to try to help him understand his losses. Much of the book of Job is devoted to their conversation as they sought to understand how such evil could come to such an upright and good person. The conclusion of Job’s friends was that Job must have deserved his fate, being punished by God for some failure or sin. In this take on things, they

were echoing much human wisdom, including much of the wisdom of ancient Israel as recorded in books like Proverbs, that God (or the gods) rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. But Job was upright and blameless, and did not deserve the losses he experienced, and so he pushed back on the wisdom of his friends and held that God must also allow bad things to come to the innocent. Through his losses, he learned that good things do not always happen to good people, and that even when experiencing losses that have no reason, he could remain faithful to God and thankful for what he did have. Job gained this wisdom only by experiencing his many losses, and as we heard in today's lesson, exclaimed to God, "Now my eye sees you." Through his difficulties, Job gained insight, becoming aware of the greatness of God and his own humility.

The story concludes, as we also heard today, with an ironic twist, that even though God doesn't necessarily ruin the wicked or reward the righteous with material blessings, God not only restored Job's wealth and health, but doubled it, so Job lived to be a golden ager, living well past the ripe old age of 140, and saw blessing upon blessing upon blessing come to him and generations of his family.

Our second lesson from the gospel of Mark also tells of a man who experienced both losses and gains. Bartimaeus, who at some point in his life lost his sight, was begging for mercy on the side of a road when he heard that Jesus was coming near. He cried out to Jesus for mercy, and Jesus replied by asking him what he wanted. "To see again," he told Jesus. Immediately, Bartimaeus was healed. His sight was restored and he responded to this gift by following Jesus on his way.

In both of these stories of people who had experienced great losses for no apparent fault of their own, God acted graciously through their adversity to help them gain insight, divine wisdom, and to find well-being.

One of the lessons these stories teach us is that God will act, mercifully and graciously, not because grace and mercy are deserved, or can be earned, or can be obtained through upright living, or gained through religious rituals, for they are freely given gifts.

This is a truth that inspired Martin Luther, as we remember on this Reformation Sunday, to write his *95 Theses*, which challenged the notion that God's mercy and grace could be earned -- or purchased. Following the path of Luther, we hold that these gifts are freely offered, with or without the intervention of the church or

any other human institution, to the righteous and sinners alike, to those who have lost everything and those who have gained much, to those who grieve and those who rejoice, to the young and the old, to those who are at the peak of health and to those whose bodies are in need of healing.

I pray that more of God's mercy and grace would be with all in this world who are in need of well-being this morning, especially those who suffer because of no choice of their own. May God's mercy and grace be with the children of Lebanon, who had already been experiencing terrible losses and hardships from tragedy after tragedy and now find themselves living in a war zone. May God's mercy and grace be with children around the world who suffer from hunger. May God's mercy and grace be with us, help us to heal from our own infirmities and to gain insight, that we might humbly see God as Job came to see God, and rise to follow in the humble, healing way of Christ, just as Bartimaeus responded to receiving mercy and grace by following the gracious and merciful way of Christ.

Dear friends, let us always follow in this way and use our own energies to continue Christ's work of helping and healing. As we gain years, may we use them all well, however we are able, to enact God's mercy and grace in the lives of one another and the world around us. Amen.