

## *Judge for Yourself*

Job 38: 1-15 1 Corinthians 4: 1-10

To qualify for something, you usually have to perform a test that measures your aptitude. To evaluate your qualifications for college, you take a test, just one more big test for today's students who are regularly tested to see if they qualify to pass a course, advance to the next level, or to graduate. To see if you can drive a car, you have to pass a driving test. To qualify to begin driving a car with a learner's permit, you have to pass a written test.

To become a Presbyterian minister, you have to pass 5 denominational exams as well as get a masters degree and have a working knowledge of both biblical languages. We have these requirements so that we can show off to our congregations that we're real smarty pants.

For Methodists, ordination means journeying into the wilderness with Moses for 40 years, and staying awake in the Garden of Gethsemane, carrying the cross, and cleaning up afterward. Truly, the Methodists have the most tortuous path to ordination. Not for any better purpose than the Presbyterians, it simply seems spiteful.

Once we're qualified, we are given permission or authorization to do all kinds of things. One of the things we believe life experience grants us is the permission or authorization to be qualified to render our judgments on all kinds of things. To some degree that's warranted. In other areas, it isn't. Regardless, we become judges for ourselves. Not that we necessarily do a good job at judging *ourselves*; that's not what I mean. We judge everything *for ourselves* and believe that we're qualified to make those assertions. It's a pattern that we establish as teenagers and continue almost unabated into adulthood. Age and experience may temper our enthusiasm in some things about which we've learned that we aren't so qualified, but frankly that's minor. We're quite qualified to judge these things, thank you very much.

We've been following along with the Job story and we come to its conclusion. Job is finally gaining his audience with God. You'll recall last week how confident he was that God would realize God's mistake once Job pointed out God's mistake to God. The evidence would be clear and Job could actually say, "Judge for yourself, my Lord God. I have been done an injustice which is plain to see. As a man of righteousness and goodness, I am qualified to know and feel perfectly justified in bringing my case before you."

He already tried this argument on his friends who came by. They haven't been much consolation. In fact, as Job insistently declares how God has made a mistake and proclaims his righteousness, the "friends" insist just as strenuously that he must in truth be a sinner. If God is just (and the accepted belief is that God is just), then Job must be a sinful man deserving of condemnation. Job demands: 'judge for yourself; what sinfulness could I have done to deserve such devastating wrath?' His friends shoot back: 'judge yourself, for surely you have sinned greatly!'

Even though this argument hasn't worked at all with his friends, Job remains fixated on the notion that God will be moved by his appeal and address the injustice that has mistakenly occurred.

In today's reading, God has finally decided enough is enough. God has heard the protests of his servant Job, and God thunders: *Who is this that darkens my counsel with word without knowledge?* Job isn't off to a good start already, and he hasn't even begun to lay out his case.

God continues: *Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you will answer me.* Again, this is not working out as Job planned. Job was supposed to plead his case before God, in effect putting God on trial for having wrongly punished him for sinfulness of which he cannot imagine having done. Now we see that God is putting Job on trial. Job probably has that sinking feeling that all of his assumptions have suddenly turned out to be totally off base. And now it's too late to retreat and re-group.

We can imagine how Job feels because we've been there, done that at some point in our lives. We've stormed forward into a mess, sure that we know things are wrong and how things should be, and we're going to straighten this out, only we find out that we're all wrong.

Further, if we're being honest with ourselves, we would act just as Job has, protesting that we have not deserved such punishment, that we have a level of righteousness and faithfulness that should save us from such things. And we would demand to call God to account for this miscarriage of justice, and find ourselves quaking in our shoes as God roars for us to brace ourselves for the interrogation of a lifetime.

*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?*

Ah, this would be the lesson where God teaches the trembling Job how God is God and Job is not. God carries on at length about this, and then God asks:

*Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it? It is changed like clay under the seal, and it is dyed like a garment. Light is withheld from the wicked, and their uplifted arm is broken.*

The imagery of shaking out the skirts of the earth with each new morning refers to the habit of vermin to cuddle up for warmth amid the cold darkness, and how the new morning means shaking them out. Each new morning is a re-play of God's creation. In that creation, there is a new start as the encroachment under the cloak of darkness of that which is vile and detestable gets reversed. In shaking the earth's skirts, things are set aright once again. The image of the seal in clay indicates a defined and intricate

pattern in the seal impressed again upon the misshapen lump of clay. The intent of the Creator is impressed anew, and the new creation once again bears the Creator's indelible promise, like a garment dyed a particular hue.

The distinctive shape and unique content of the new creation is revealed in the last line: *Light is withheld from the wicked, and their uplifted arm is broken.* God's creation is meant for the fulfillment of justice, and with each new day, the hope is reset and restored.

The final word as we follow along God's response to Job is that Job not only was not there to do the things God has done, Job has not appreciated how God makes all things new with each new day. Job seems unaware of how God renews the sacred promise with each sunrise. Job has not appreciated God's aims for justice that turn back the advancing corruptions of wickedness, injustice, and sinfulness as dawn surges onto the horizon. Job has no idea how wrong he is, and until now, has failed to realize how small he is. While he remained faithful in some ways to his God, his spirit changed and his faith in God became faith in his own understanding.

In the other reading from First Corinthians, the apostle Paul is writing a letter from afar to the church in Corinth. Reports have come to him of conflict, dissensions, and confusion within the church that he had established. The church has divided itself according to the individuals and groups who have brought various teachings and practices. In the previous chapter (3), we hear mention of Apollos who seems to be a John-the-Baptist disciple, of Peter (or Cephas) who seems to have some problems with the ministry to the Gentiles (or non-Jews) and has more conservative ideas about how Jesus' followers should keep the Jewish law, on dietary issues particularly. And we also hear reference made to "wisdom," which seems to indicate the presence of teachings of Gnosticism. (Gnosticism believes that those who embrace secret, sacred knowledge are able to progressively ascend to higher realms of sacred being, giving rise to claims by some that they are more knowledgeable, more holy, than others.)

The church in Corinth is a whopping mess. Paul seems to have written the letter while in Ephesus, so he is quite distant as he tries to bring order to the church with his letter. He begins our passage by describing himself and his fellow workers as "servants of Christ, and as those entrusted with the **secret** things of God." It seems that this very early Christian Gnosticism is particularly troublesome in Paul's mind as he refers to having been entrusted with "the secret things of God."

Paul goes on to deny any concern with judgments from others, whether the Corinthians or anyone else, even himself. "It is the Lord who judges me," not anyone else.

He goes on to say how his principles are applied to himself and to Apollos, referring confidently to his positive reconciliation of message with Apollos, the John-the-Baptist disciple. Paul and Apollos are on the same page, being different but being united in their ministry, message, and principles. However, the Gnostics are another matter. His reference to, "Do not go beyond what is written," is meant to caution against

speculations that go far beyond what scripture states, or what theology and practice should be among those who follow Jesus. Such speculations were rampant among the Gnostics whose interpretations of scripture could easily go off the charts.

In a series of rhetorical questions, he asks in essence how they got where they are; wasn't it through someone else's ministry, through the blessing of God that they received the Holy Spirit, through Christ that they received the promise of new life, not something that they had been born with, obviously since they're all converts to the way of Christ? In short, they're nothing special that they should proclaim themselves judges of anyone or anything.

It is a somewhat mocking comparison with which Paul concludes our passage. Already you have it all – you're rich, you're kings! Yet Paul and his co-workers in the mission field are a spectacle, not at the head of the line, but bringing up the rear, "like men condemned to die in the arena." Finally Paul says: *We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in dishonor.* By exposing the hubris of their claims, Paul shows how they've tipped the scales, gotten far ahead of themselves, and end up having qualified themselves to judge without showing the marks of spirituality and faithfulness to God and Christ that would actually qualify them.

We started off discussing how qualifications get earned, typically from testing to assess learning and skill. The point of learning can be seen, but testing is sometimes lacking. The difference in handling the Bible between a Sunday School teacher, a seminarian, and a pastor with 20 years of experience is going to be quite extensive. The Sunday School teacher with a good curriculum may feel quite confident in leading the lesson. The seminarian who has completed a variety of courses in theology, biblical studies, language, polity, worship, and a whole lot more may be ready to receive a call to serve in a church. The pastor with 20 years of experience in serving churches is more likely going to be in a balance, having learned a great deal along the way, and having also learned how little all of that learning and experience matters so often.

At the end of all of this, we find the focus of the Lord's servant cannot be separated from the priority of faithfulness. It is not our wisdom, our knowledge, our skill, our experience, our innate qualities, our spiritual devotions, or anything else except our faithfulness in spirit toward the invitation to follow our Savior Jesus and let him be our model. Being faithful to the values of the Kingdom, making the humble and grace-filled demeanor of Jesus as our own, we are led by the right spirit toward the promise of new life with each new day.