

Do You Not Care?

In the name of him who commands the wind and sea, dear friends in Christ: Let me begin with a quick survey here. Raise your hand if you are entirely satisfied with the way our duly elected leaders in Washington are running our country and the decisions they are making. Okay. Now, raise your hand if sometimes you are thoroughly disgusted with the decisions being made by the people running our country and you find yourself wondering with incredulity, “What on earth are they thinking?”

Much as I suspected, we are generally not happy with those who are in positions of leadership and authority over us. And this doesn't apply just to politics. No, we can find and complain about incompetent leadership in all aspects of life. Employees gripe about their bosses, soldiers about their superior officers, and children about their parents. This may come as a shock to you, but I've even heard of congregations complaining about the spiritual leadership provided by their pastors. Hard to imagine, isn't it? But it's true.

Now, about such complaints against authorities a few things need to be said. First, that in this fallen world sometimes the complaints are entirely legitimate. People in authority can be wrong. They can make mistakes. They can render stupid decisions. And when they do, it's right to let them know what you think. On the other hand, there are times when such complaints are not legitimate. The person in authority who is the subject of criticism may have more information available to them. They might be looking at a bigger picture, so that a decision that you think is dumb or that affects you in a negative way may be better for the organization as a whole. And there's this to consider: whenever you complain about how someone is performing in their job of leadership, implied in that criticism is the prideful boast, “If I were in charge, if I were running this show, well, then things would be so much better.” And who knows? You may be correct – or not.

Ah, but last week when we met for worship the overall theme for the day was the kingdom of God. Though unseen, though a kingdom without borders, it is a real kingdom comprised of all the faithful. And it has a real king: our Lord Jesus Christ. He is, we have to admit, the ultimate authority – the ultimate leader. And that, in turn, makes him the subject of some of our ultimate complaints.

This is the theme of two of today's Scripture lessons. In the Gospel reading, we have Jesus and his disciples crossing over the Sea of Galilee in a small fishing boat. One of the sudden, violent squalls the lake is known for strikes. The disciples, most of whom are experienced sailors, find themselves out of their league. The boat is heeling way over in the wind, is being beaten by the crashing waves, and is filling with water faster than they can bail it out. Meanwhile Jesus sleeps peacefully in the stern sheets – sleeping not because he doesn't care, but because he's not worried. He is faithfully performing his Father's will, and he knows his Father has a plan and will see them all safely through. No worries.

The disciples, on the other hand, are terrified. They begin to panic. They wake Jesus and accusingly demand of him, “Do you not care if we perish?” It is, on the surface, a profoundly stupid question. It was precisely to save us from perishing that the Son of God came down from heaven and took on our human flesh so that, out of his great love, he could suffer and die for our sins on the cross. No one could possibly care more if people perish than Jesus.

Beyond this, it's worth asking what they expected Jesus to do about their situation. They were the seasoned sailors, not Jesus. They were the ones with the skills to handle a boat in rough weather. And they had no idea that he could just speak a word and turn the storm off. It surprised and astonished them when he did that. So, what did they think he would do? Help bail water?

This being said, it's only fair that we cut the disciples a little slack. I mean, they didn't know yet about Christ's death for sin and his resurrection. They didn't know he had the power to command the wind and sea. And they were facing what they thought to be imminent death – a time when most people don't do their clearest thinking. So, we can understand if not approve of their lack of faith.

But we have no excuse. We do know of our Savior's infinite love and care for us. We know now that he has ascended into glory all things – *all things* – fall under his almighty command and control. Nothing escapes his notice. No task is too difficult for him. Nothing happens that lies beyond his good and gracious will for us. We know that he is working all things on this fallen earth for the good of those who love and trust him: we, the citizens of his kingdom. And yet, and yet how many times in the midst of one of life's storms, when faced with a tragedy, an unpleasant or difficult circumstance, a sickness or injury, the sudden and unexpected loss of a loved one ... how many times have you found yourself questioning his loving care? "Why are you doing this?" Or, if you don't want to blame him directly, "How could you have let this happen?"

Theologians who are a lot smarter than me distinguish between what they call the active will and the permissive will of God, that is, what he wants to happen and what he allows to happen. When I'm facing a crisis, I don't know how helpful a distinction that is. It's still his will. Either he is God almighty or he's not. And if he is, there's not much of a distinction to be made. *He's running the show*. Now, I should qualify that a bit. It is never God's will that someone sin, and he doesn't make people sin; that comes from within their own evil natures. But if in his wisdom the Lord does not intervene to prevent someone from sinning against you, say, then you can be sure that he intends that sin for the good of you and/or others. God even uses evil people and their sins for his good purposes. We have only to look at the cross of Jesus and see that it's true. God worked our eternal salvation by the greatest of all sins: the murder of his own Son.

So, whether it's a storm of nature you're facing: tempest, fire, flood, famine, pandemic, what have you; or if it's a storm of manmade cause: theft, assault, betrayal, insult, injury – either way, as we just sang, "the Lord is on your side; bear patiently the cross of grief or pain; leave to your God to order and provide; in every change, he faithful will remain. Be still my soul; your best, your heavenly Friend through thorny ways leads to a joyful end." We sing these words because they are true. The question is: do we truly believe them?

And yes, I understand that this is a hard teaching. To try to explain it to someone whose home has just burned to the ground, or whose child has been murdered, or to a woman who has been raped and beaten, or to a person whose spouse has been unfaithful – maybe that's not the best time for a lesson in difficult theology. Those are times for comfort, aid, sympathy, and loving support. On the other hand, *now* is the time for this hard teaching when things are relatively safe and secure in order to prepare you for the storms when they come – and they will. If you are prepared in advance, if you understand that the Lord sends evil for your good, if you trust in his loving care, rather than angrily shaking your fist at him accusingly asking "Do

you not care?”, you’ll be able to be like Job who in a matter of hours suffered the loss of his ten children and everything he owned, and then sat down in sorrow and declared “The Lord gives. The Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

Such faith in the Lord’s goodness. Such trust. Too bad it didn’t last. In the Sunday school version of Job’s story, he remains patient and faithful in his storm of disaster. And in the end, the Lord restores his fortune. That version skips over 39 chapters of the book that bears his name. In those skipped chapters Job lets fly his bitter lament as he struggles with the question: why does the Lord cause (or *allow*, if you prefer) the righteous to suffer?

Job’s three friends who have showed up to console him in his misery think they have the answer. They tell Job he’s suffering because he is *not* righteous. No, they tell him, the Lord is punishing you for some secret sins you’ve committed. You are getting your just desserts. Job protests. Their accusations are not true – not that Job is innocent of all sin, but that he is righteous before the Lord by faith. He repents of his sins and offers the appropriate sacrifices by which in Old Testament times the Lord counted his people righteous.

So, Job is left with a dilemma. It appears to him that the Lord is treating him unjustly. Why is that, he asks. Is it that the Lord himself is unjust? Is it that he is unkind or uncaring? Is it that he is unable to prevent evil from happening? None of these answers make sense to Job. They don’t fit with what he knows about the Lord’s character. As we near the end of his story, Job stands demanding that the Lord come down and answer his questions.

The Lord does come down – in a storm of all things. And from the storm he replies to Job; not with answers to Job’s questions, but with questions of his own. I’m paraphrasing here: “Who are you to question me? You don’t even know what you’re talking about. But since you claim to know so much, answer me this, wise guy: where were you when I did all the wondrous work of creation? When I laid the foundation of the earth? When I made the sun, moon, and stars? When I created the atmosphere and set the seas in place? Can you explain how I did these things?” These are just the beginning of the Lord’s questions; he has many more. And Job can answer none of them. Each question stresses two things: the Lord’s power and his wisdom. They essentially say “I am in control and I know what I’m doing. Your task is not to understand me or to judge my decisions. Your part is to trust me.”

Job repents of his lack of patience and faith – of his questioning the Lord. And so must we when in life’s storms we question the Lord’s loving care, his wisdom, or his justice. And receiving his forgiveness for Christ’s sake, rather than ask, “Do you not care?” we ask instead for the faith and grace to accept the Lord’s will for our lives, to trust his wisdom and loving care, and, if it be his will, to understand what good he is bringing about through the evils we suffer.

The storms God sends he intends for our good. It is through suffering that we learn compassion for those who are suffering. It’s through difficulty that we learn patience. It’s through hardship that we learn endurance. It’s through being sinned against that we learn forgiveness. It’s by being humbled that we learn humility. It’s through loss of things that can be seen that we learn to trust in things unseen. These virtues the Lord works in us through life’s storms. There are times to question and complain about the decisions of our earthly authorities, but Jesus, our ultimate king, makes no mistakes. His wisdom and love for us are perfect. May he give us the grace to perfectly trust him. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!