

Chapel Talk
Heather Casteel
January 16, 2008

Text: Job 16:1-6

In the Book of Job, as I'm sure most of you know, a righteous man is tested by God and loses everything. He does, however, maintain his innocence, and in the end has everything restored to him many times over. The moral of this happy ending is rather obvious - have faith and be rewarded. And this is the interpretation of the book that has crept into popular culture and everyday usage.

I admit that I am, somewhat morbidly, more interested in the first half of the narrative: a righteous man is tested by God and loses everything. Doesn't that seem a bit odd to you? Job did everything right, the book's introduction tells us - he sacrificed to God, prayed, celebrated holy days with his family, helped the poor and the marginalized of his society. Yet he lost everything - at the behest of God himself! - and spends most of the book sitting in the dirt, miserable, destitute, his children dead, bleeding from open wounds and sores. In fact, Job's restoration occurs only in the last few lines of the Book, in a prose section that breaks abruptly from the Hebrew poetry filling hundreds of lines in the middle. It seems almost an afterthought.

So I wanted to take some time this evening to explore the somewhat tough reality raised by most of the account: What happens when you try really hard, and it still isn't good enough? When you do everything right, and still lose? Everyone has experienced this kind of unexpected defeat, and I wanted to see what, if any, advice or comfort Job can provide, and if there is another moral we can glean other than waiting for God to come down and fix our tragedies for us.

Now I know that sounds like a total bummer of a topic, and I suppose that the timing of this talk (about unexpected, undeserved failure), two days before the beginning of exams, might seem a bit ominous. I don't mean it that way. I don't want to focus on failure itself. Instead, I'd

like to speak a bit about the context of failure. Over this past summer I learned more than I ever expected about the ways in which our society creates and perpetuates a whole environment of failure for so many people. And then, just like Job's friends, we are quick to pin blame back onto those whom we set up for a fall. I'd like to tell you about that experience, and what came out of it for me—a belief in the purpose of community and the importance of patience and forgiveness.

A word of warning: it may seem like I'm asking a lot of questions. I can't deny it. In some ways I'm amazed they're even letting me talk up here. I am much closer in age to all of you than to most of your distinguished faculty, after all. I don't have any answers, just more and more questions. That's the spirit in which I hope you'll take the rest of this talk, and also my defense against any of you who may agree with my old philosophy professor, who issued an absolute semester-long prohibition against question marks. I can't help it!

Anyway, I taught this summer at a program designed for underachieving students in the Seattle public school system. They were all preparing to start high school. Many of them had technically failed the middle school requirements, and this program was the only way for them to graduate and move into 9th grade.

I didn't just teach math. I had the same classroom of 18 students all day, and I taught them all their subjects. It was hard, and not just because I don't know how to teach something as irritating as a short story (no offense intended). The goal of the program was to show these kids that school could be something fun and something of which they were actually capable.

In line with this philosophy, my fellow teachers were all very accessible and hip. They were mostly in their 30s, interested in art, clothes, sports, hip-hop. Aside from being one of the few white staff members, I was the only one with no tattoo. I felt like, as Mr. Brown might say, a huge geekasaurus. Come on, I am a product of 13 years of private education. I wear cardigans voluntarily.

Maybe you can picture it: there I was, awkward, prone to using excessively long words in simple explanations, unclear on what exactly “stunna shades” were, and absolutely terrible at all sports. Basically, I am a big nerd. All this, and the pressure of the program was not to cover the course material, it was to effect, or at least to begin, a kind of attitude transformation for these students as they started high school.

We were supposed to be the proof that school was accessible, that teachers could be fun and interesting and caring. I just felt stuck, uncomfortable, and hypocritical. What was I supposed to do - tell them if they work hard maybe they could go to a private college off in Massachusetts, like I did? That feels so incredibly condescending.

I worked hard to get over myself and my mental block. We made some progress; there are moments that I am proud of; students for whom I like to think I made a difference, but in the end I mostly just felt confused and hopeless.

No matter how much I struggled, however, I was constantly shocked by the difficulties these students faced. My fellow teachers tried to prepare me for the news that I must expect but am terrified to receive over the next couple of years. Many of my summer students will not make it through high school. Some may get pregnant, and it will be unplanned and potentially unwanted. Some may even die, in gang fights or in drunk driving accidents. All of my colleagues had stories along these lines.

One of the more experienced staff members told me about the worst moment in her teaching career, when she ran into one of her former students homeless and begging for money on the sidewalk in downtown Seattle. I can only imagine what that must feel like, but I am sure that the question becomes insistent, overwhelming: How did I fail that child? What did I say or do wrong? What did I not say or do at all? Maybe this is how Job felt: I did everything I could, and things still went terribly wrong.

The easy response is simply to shift the blame. I mean, come on. We only taught at that summer program for a few weeks. Whatever series of choices or catastrophes that ended in the

former student's life on the street weren't my colleagues' choices and catastrophes. Maybe we should be asking: How did that child fail himself? It's easy to imagine how we would have done things differently, as we sit here in this beautiful chapel on this beautiful campus, in a nation that places the highest value on personal responsibility.

Yet I wonder if anyone with this sort of not-my-problem attitude were to actually meet with the students struggling in overcrowded and dangerous schools and observe that atmosphere for a while - would they still be able to say, face-to-face: "What, you're thinking about dropping out? Don't be ridiculous. You just need to try harder." What does that even mean? What are we all doing in life, and especially in high school, but trying to choose the best life for ourselves, to fit in, make friends, be loved and valued by other people? Do you really think that there are many people who don't try hard at life, who wake up every morning and say to themselves "Gee, I think I'd really like to screw things up today."

Perhaps it's more than time that we focus less on personal obligations and personal liability and more on the obligations of our community. It's our society and country, after all, that have been failing students like the ones I taught and the thousands like them across the country - failing them since before they were born, and when they were infants with no health care, and toddlers with no day care, and kids in the underfunded and, frankly, depressing public elementary schools that serve the poorest neighborhoods in cities like Seattle.

OK, I think you've all heard this argument before. But the more times we hear about the terrible situation of education in this country and still cling to our self-righteous refusal to share in the responsibility, well, the more we are complicit in every tragedy like the situation of my friend's former student who is now living on the street.

If this all seems a bit distant, let me try another example closer to our home here. After Thanksgiving vacation, the faculty met with Dr. Ned Hallowell, who does research and practices in the field of learning disabilities like ADD and ADHD. He spoke compellingly on the troubled history of society and educational institutions dealing with learning differences.

It used to be thought that kids with ADD and ADHD only had trouble focusing in class because they just weren't trying hard enough. If they would just work harder, teachers and administrators told them, everything would be fine. If that sensible argument didn't work, well, maybe a bit of corporal punishment would help the message sink in: stop being so lazy and start paying more attention in your classes! Try harder! Again, what does that even mean?

This is the same as me sitting down with one of my students and telling him: "Johnny, it seems you aren't doing too well in my class. Have you tried just being smarter? How is that going for you?" That's ridiculous, right? and maybe even a little cruel. This attitude remains common, however. I still catch myself as I write comments or special comments, in an attempt to say something constructive, start typing out "try harder," or "put in a stronger effort." Maybe this could be useful feedback in cases of deep-seated apathy, but those students are probably going to need more than one special comment to get going anyway. We all need to be more sympathetic, to operate under the unusual assumption that everyone around us is already working hard and doing their best. Then we can start to think of comments and suggestions that might actually be helpful. Otherwise, we're as doomed as Job's insensitive and foolish friends, adding to his grief by attributing blame where none is deserved.

So this is how I like to think of Job: as a narrative less about personal responsibility and salvation and more about community—that sometimes, things just aren't fair, and people suffer, and it's not just their problem. Job's friends, of course (his proverbial comforters) do see it in terms of blame and liability. They tell Job that he must have done something specifically wrong, that God would never deviate from what they perceive to be a kind of strict, simplistic justice: try hard, succeed. Sin, and bear the consequences. But life is not just a string of cause-and-effect relationships that we each create for ourselves. It's a mistake to think of it that way and it's wrong to judge others on those grounds.

This summer I experienced the jarring collision of my own failures - the edge of my abilities to empathize and connect with others - and the failures that awaited many of my students in their impending adulthoods. And the Book of Job? Well, I do not find the narrative itself reassuring. The narrative, taken literally, demonstrates the limits of personal agency and responsibility and

describes a shortsighted and vindictive community response. Now, however, I see much more. Implicit in the book, at least to me, is a positive alternative, not just in the strength of God but also in real, responsible community.

Keep your patience. Try not to blame. Yes, by all means, do your best in life, and on your exams two days from now, but most importantly, remember that's all that anyone ever does.