

## Render an Account: A Reprise of my October 9, 1994 Sermon, "On Taking God to Court"

- Job 23:1-9, 16-17; Mark 10:17-31; Hebrews 4:12-16
- October 11, 2009
- W. Kenneth Williams, First Baptist Church of Rochester

Not too long ago I served on a jury, an armed robbery case. I got a chance to experience a real trial from the jury box. Cases were prepared and presented, rules of evidence and decorum were followed, interpretations of the law were made. Both prosecution and defense were zealous, in some cases meticulous, in others bombastic in an attempt to bolster a weak argument. I came away from the experience with a sense of the simple elegance of the trial-by-jury system. We trust people to listen, to connect logical points, and then to use understanding and reason to render a verdict. Perhaps another time I will tell you more about the inside of the jury deliberation room, for that was an experience in and of itself.

Each evening, it seems, the local news has cameras outside the courtrooms in the Hall of Justice downtown. Courtrooms occupy the front page of the newspapers and the lead stories in the broadcast media. We love the drama of trials. It is also an open secret that civil litigation is as common a going to the grocery store. Everybody sues, seemingly just like everybody eats.

Today's lesson from Job reveals Job's fantasy of taking God to court. Says Job "I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No. But he would give heed to me." (23:4-6) This is a marvelously magnanimous attitude in light of all that had become of Job.

Let's take a flight of imagination. Suppose God were taken to court. Picture the judge on the bench, the clerk of court and the court reporter in their places. You are sitting in the jury box. Beyond the Bar is the Plaintiff table and adjacent to it, the Defendant's table. In this context, God is charged with "capricious divinity in the first degree." The judge gavels the court to order. Opening statements are waived. The Plaintiff Advocate rises and calls God to the witness stand.

\*\*\*

Plaintiff: Would you please state your name for the record?

God: You know me as God. Since the names by which I am known would fill many pages, God will do. I also answer to Yahweh, Jehovah, El Shaddai, Lord. No matter how you address me, I get the message.

Plaintiff: God, you are charged in this court with capriciousness, which suggests that you don't get all your messages, or, worse, that you ignore those that call upon you. What do you have to say for yourself?

God: Nothing.

Plaintiff: Nothing? Are we to believe from this response that you fail to take our charges seriously?

God: Believe me. I take you seriously. I take everybody seriously.

Plaintiff: What about our brother, Job? Can you honestly tell us that you take this horribly stricken man, this person who lost everything that ever meant anything to him, seriously? Again and again, he sought your listening ear. Again and again he sought your justice. Did you hear Job? Did you listen to him?

God: Yes. And, I can assure you, I am always honest.

Plaintiff: Then, if you heard Job, and you honestly listened to Job, why did you not help him?

God: I did help him.

Plaintiff: How can you SAY THAT? He lost his children. He lost his land. He was naked, homeless, and he had festering boils all over his body. He called on you constantly.

God: My heart aches at how much Job suffered.

Plaintiff: Well, Your “aching” heart apparently did not move you to show compassion. People who are suffering need comfort. They need healing. They need hope. Where’s the evidence that you did anything at all to answer Job’s prayers to you?

God: Job’s life.

Plaintiff: Job’s life was a wreck! Its evidence that you’re guilty of capricious lordship, as charged, right?

God: Job was a righteous man. His righteousness was his integrity. That he never fully lost hope is evidence of my companionship with him in his suffering.

Plaintiff: What on earth does God know about suffering?

God: Suffering is the ache of absence when someone loved is lost. Suffering is the body crying out for denied necessities. Suffering is powerlessness in the face of oppression. Suffering is innocent blood shed in ignoble conflicts. Suffering is perpetual failure. Suffering is not getting your hearts desire. Sometimes, suffering is getting exactly what you asked for. Suffering is rejection, and suffering is loneliness.

Plaintiff: Since you sound so expert, God, my question is even more urgent. Why won’t you be held accountable for all the suffering around us? Job needed your help. We all need your help. Why won’t you step in on our behalf?

God: Because I love you.

Plaintiff: What? Move that witness's answer be struck as unresponsive! How can a loving God be so cruel?

God: I love you. I choose to love you. I need to love you. I need you to love me. Love only has meaning if it is freely given, freely received. In order to love you fully, and in order for you to return my love, I have to give you freedom. You have the free will to pay no attention to your Creator at all. I am deeply, passionately aware that freedom is a mixed blessing. Freedom leads to chaos, violence, accidents, jealousy, sin, and, hence, suffering. On the other hand, living freely can lead to the highest joy there is - knowing and being known and growing in love.

Plaintiff: So, you're saying that you would not intervene to stop suffering, no matter how egregious or outrageous?

God: My interventions are not like the warranties and guarantees that you want for every transaction you make. You want insurance. I give assurance. You want someone to blame for bad outcomes and to hold accountable for the outrageous fortune in your life. What you do to each other in your blaming battles deepens my sorrow for you. I do intervene in your affairs, but not in the way you want or expect. I act through people who love me, and who are in tune with my Holy Spirit. Such as these act to alleviate suffering, to stop violence and injustice, and to channel freedom toward love of me.

Plaintiff: A while ago, God, you said Job's life was the evidence that you answered his prayers. What did you mean?

God: Job never forsook his connection with me. He never stopped loving me. In spite of his losses, his illness, his friends' rigid and thoughtless advice, and his wife's utter frustration, Job kept the channel open. Even his argument with me is a part of our deep and abiding affection for each other. Through all his trials he continued to seek me. He never gave up on me, or our relationship. That's true love.

\*\*\*

Judge: The case is now with you, the jury. You must decide, based upon your own conscience and faith, whether or not God is capricious, as the plaintiff claims. Given that this is a civil suit, your decision must be guided by the preponderance of the evidence. Is God aloof and capricious, and unavailable to suffering souls? Or is God present in ways that are beyond our knowing and that only faith can perceive? Go and deliberate in the court of your own conscience.

God save this honorable court. Amen.