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October 24, 2021

Open-ended Hearts

Job 42:1-6, 10-17

Friends, I know this will come as a surprise to you, but teenaged Ian had a predilection for righteous indignation—some might even say it bordered on *self-righteous* indignation. And there was nothing that would raise my ire quite like an easy answer to a large and looming question—or worse yet, the *refusal* to ask a large and looming question simply because there were no easy answers to be found.

“So you’re telling me that *all* the Buddhists are going to Hell?” I asked incredulously of one of my youth group leaders during a Wednesday night gathering. And before you give me too much credit for my burgeoning universalism, know that sometimes I just liked to watch the adult youth leaders sweat. But God surely has a sense of humor, because now *I* get to be put on the spot for a living—and by much smarter youth.

I gained a *bit* of a reputation for questions like these. In fact, the teacher to whom I posed that question about Buddhists—to this day if I see him back home he makes a remark about what a pain in the neck I was as a student. He says it in jest, but in all these years he has never failed to bring it up when I see him.

I blame my father, of course. I remind him at every available opportunity that *he* was the one who would say, “God can handle your questions.” This always gets a little chuckle out of him, the Southern Baptist preacher, because he knows it’s true: I’m here today only because I asked the tough questions of our faith.

I think he's a little more than surprised, we might even say scandalized, by the answers I've come to embrace—but I have to give my father credit where it's due: he gave me permission to ask the difficult questions in the first place.

And the older I get the more I realize that *that* was no small thing, especially in our very conservative tradition. In fact, it may have been the greatest gift I've ever received.

It put me in a posture of conversation with the divine. It gave me a spaciousness outside myself for those large and looming questions that seemed to burn inside me.

Don't you remember the weight of those existential concerns you held as a teenager? The urgent need for answers, for direction, for someone just to listen?

In telling me that God can handle my questions, my father implicitly affirmed that *I* was not a burden. That the divine had room enough for all of my vulnerabilities, my fears, my doubts—and the tender places within me that their anxious energy was trying to distract from, and protect.

If indeed the mouth speaks out of the abundance of the heart, as Jesus says, then our questions offer others a glimpse of what our hearts are holding. Hospitality to another's questions offers us a window to their fears, their desires, their hopes and dreams. It offers us room sufficient for an authentic encounter with each other.

Affirmed of God's open posture toward my questions, as I grew older I began to ask more questions, harder questions, even unanswerable questions. I hoped to cultivate a curiosity to match this divine capaciousness—deep calling to deep.

I've been speaking in the past tense up to now, friends, but this is still the defining virtue of my spirituality today—the pursuit of *spaciousness*.

Because I believe a compassionate heart is a capacious one. I often catch myself testing the divine, testing institutions like this one, testing those I love—do you have room for me? For *all* of me? For the messy, scared, doubtful, and *seemingly unlovable* parts of me?

Which is perhaps why I have been so protective of Job this week. Talk about messy, and spacious. There seems to be room for nearly everyone and nearly every question in these 42 chapters.

According to scholars, it's a polyphonic, multivocal, genre-blending text. Ken Stone and Carol Newsom note that the “many voices” of this story often “contest and interrupt each other.”

Even at its conclusion, Newsom says, “the conversation remains not only unfinalized but unfinalizable.” *Unfinalizable*—what a word.

“The proper response to such a book,” she proposes, “is to inject oneself into the conversation, but with the awareness that the final word can never be spoken.”

The Book of Job demands of us not just a posture of openness, but a posture of *openendedness*. A willingness to show up for one another not

only when the questions don't have easy answers, but even when the questions are *unanswerable*.

So, in reading the concluding lines of Job this week, I picked up that *self-righteous* indignation again—feeling that I needed to protect the previous 41 chapters from the text's conclusion.

I mean, how neatly those 41 chapters are wrapped up here in the last 8 verses! After Job speaks, the complex poetic voice that defined this book starting in Chapter 3 is over, a narrative voice resumes, and we are told the following:

Job repents, God restores his fortunes, his family and friends are suddenly back (with gifts, no less!), he dies “old and full of days”—and, by the way, his new daughters are super hot. Awesome!

Nothing raises my ire quite like an easy answer to a large and looming question—and this conclusion feels like a hastily constructed and rather shallow response to the largest and *loomingest* question of all—you know, the thing Job is sort of known for, why this text has endured for thousands and thousands of years. Because at its heart, Job is about the problem of evil. Theodicy. The irreconcilability of a just, loving God and a world full of suffering.

I was itching this week to find evidence that this narrative conclusion was somehow tacked on at a later date by some thoroughly *un-self-actualized* rube. The best I could find was Ken Stone's admission that the final verses of Job seem “in some ways to contradict other parts of the book”—but he wouldn't go so far as to say that it didn't belong.

The concluding narrator is, after all, one of the many voices that make Job the complex and enduring text it is.

Here I was in search of a simple solution to get rid of this easy answer. And the difficult questions my response to these final verses raised within me.

God must have a sense of humor.

So after my fellow pastors and the entire Wednesday morning Bible study graciously held space for my rants about how awful the conclusion of this narrative was, I began to ask myself: Ian, why do you care so much?

Because of the hospitality of this community, in time I felt brave enough to turn within and ask, “What’s going on here? Where does it hurt?”

And I remembered.

You see, when I was 15, my parents’ divorce tore apart my family and my church. The founding and senior pastor was kicked out, and soon after my father (the associate pastor) resigned. Many people left the church, including everyone in my family—except for me.

A new pastor took the helm. Now, I grew up in a tradition that embraced the prosperity gospel, the belief that we can measure divine favor by our wealth and our health—and secure them all as long as we have enough faith. But this new pastor was really sold on this—to the point that he discouraged us from even acknowledging suffering for fear that naming

it would only increase its hold on our lives and invite in further suffering.

He even changed the lyrics to one of my favorite worship songs that quoted Job: “You give and take away,” it said. “You give and take away. My heart will choose to say, ‘Lord blessed be your name.’”

But Job’s declaration in Chapter 1 unsettled the new pastor, so he changed the song’s lyrics to say, “You give me peace today. You take my sins away.” A more palatable message for a health-and-wealth gospel.

Itching for a fight, full of that righteous indignation, I stormed into his office to demand what gave him the right to change Job’s words. “Well,” he told me, “Job repented in the end, didn’t he?”—virtually negating the first 41 chapters of the text altogether. Smoothing out the messiness of Job’s suffering and his complaints—and the difficult questions they raised.

In that moment I knew there wasn’t room for the complex reality of Job’s suffering—or mine. That there wasn’t room for doubts, or complaints, or questions—of which I had many. And for which I needed plenty of room, a space outside myself to help me hold it all.

I needed a God, a church, loved ones capacious and compassionate enough to let me show up as a messy human in a complicated world. To be authentic and in pain.

It wasn’t long after that I left the faith altogether, increasingly certain that there was no room for me in the church.

And when I read this text this week, I could only hear it in the voice of that prosperity gospel preacher.

I felt suffocated again by the collapse of the first 41 chapters of Job under the weight of the final 8 verses or so.

But this church, these loved ones, you gave me room enough to pause and ask *where* it hurt. And because of that, I have been reassured in my belief that there is a God big enough to hold the question of *why* I hurt at all.

And isn't that the hope of this story? That there are those willing to show up and hold the difficult questions with you? Because church isn't a dispenser of easy answers, but it *must* be a place of meeting for those willing to carry the questions together.

Because that, my friends, is an authentic reflection of our capacious and compassionate God. And what more can we bring to this God, to our faith, to this text, to this church, to one another, but this posture of openness. Even *openendedness*.

I still don't like the conclusion of the Book of Job, and I'm glad that others have acknowledged how disjointed the final narration feels from the rest of the text.

But I will tell you one thing I noticed in my reading this time, something that stirred in me a little bit of hope.

Skeptical as I am of it, Job's restoration follows his prayerful compassion for his friends—the turning of an open heart toward those around him. Even, perhaps, an *open-ended* heart.

We like to say in Confirmation that our faith, at its best, is a conversation. One I'm just itching to have with you. And with you. And with you.

Won't you bring your questions? Job seems to say. And I'll bring mine. I promise not to settle for the easy answers. I just want your company along the journey. Amen.