



**First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield**  
**429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330**  
*Creating Community, Welcoming All*

**October 3, “Today My Complaint is Bitter ”** Bruce Bennett

The Rev. Dr. Glenn Pemberton, pastor-turned-professor-turned-writer, the author of the quote at the top of your bulletin, says he was once asked why he decided to preach from this passage in the book of Job. He says he replied that it was easier than preaching from Mark.

What did he mean by that? Well, you know how the cycle of lectionary readings repeats every three years, and the Sunday he spoke of happened to be the same Sunday in the cycle as we are at today.

The lectionary gives us lots of choices, and usually in our church we pick one or two of them on any given Sunday. But this Sunday, Rev. Pemberton says he stuck with just Job. He stayed away from Mark. Why?

Well, I don't think this really happened with him, because Rev. Pemberton is well-known for his humor. But it is funny because there is more than a grain of truth to his joke.

I was about to do the same thing - just agonize through Job in order to stay awake from Mark, but then I read something else that Glenn Pemberton wrote, something with an air of humor about it, but the humor was clearly just the wrapper around a deeply-held conviction. Basically, what he said was that the story of the Rich Man, with the “eye of the needle” thing and all, wasn't difficult to interpret and live up to at all. He says the story simply showed that this Rich Man wasn't prepared to become an activist for social justice. Basically he not only loved his money but he hoarded his privilege.

That made a big impression on me. It seemed like quite a fresh and useful insight. But, impressed and inspired as I was by it, that's not why I decided to add the passage from Mark as a second lectionary reading.

It was something that Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay wrote about today's readings: “Most stories of deliverance, healing, and restoration in the Bible happen with the immediacy that Mark is noted for expressing. We see glimpses of the story, but not the progression of the pain. We may know that the woman with the issue of blood suffered for years or that Namaan was beleaguered by leprosy for a long time, but we don't get access to their daily struggle. We meet them at their point of breakthrough. With Job, we receive an invitation into his process.”

After reading this, I realized that maybe the Rich Man in Jesus' story wasn't a two-dimensional figure who had a quick cameo role, his 15 minutes of fame, and then just ceased to exist. Maybe what Jesus was doing was introducing us to a real living man at, or near, his “point of breakthrough.” Maybe the words we heard the Rich Man say were part of his ‘lament.’

So this gave me a new way to go back to the story of Job and see where today's reading fits it to the whole. Job just had to get it out of his system. His wife knew this. She was evidently not stuck, all in her head, like he was. It took him a lot more time, a whole lot of suffering, and finally some good advice from a bystander, a bystander, who could see what was going on with him, but Job finally stopped trying to think and talk his way out of the mess his life was in. There was nothing left for him to do but give up and apologize to God for challenging him. He had no option but to surrender. He realized that he was not in control and could not win control.

After he realized that his long, long lament was not getting him anywhere, Job took what would one day become known as the First of the Twelve Steps: “We admitted we were powerless over [whoever or whatever] - that our lives had become unmanageable.” [His life had been unmanageable and it was not going to change unless he came to grips with that reality. Although his lament by itself would not get him out of his sad state, his lament was a necessary beginning.] Step Two: “Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.” [Job already had Step Two down securely. As angry as he was at God, he never lost his faith. What he appears to have lost was his humility.] Step Three: “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood [God]. [When Job finally gave up the anger and arrogance he had directed at God and began to throw himself at God’s mercy and care, his lot in life began to improve.]

Another reason came to me as to why I wanted to include the lectionary passage from Mark today. I remembered how Mark’s Gospel reports Jesus’ last words: Mark 15:34 At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Is it an accident that Jesus is said to have left this world uttering a lament? “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Is it an accident how he is said to have returned? By offering himself to us, to us, for us, all of us, fully, all of him for all of us: mind, body, and spirit.

I can’t help but hear inside my head the Communion hymn we sang last week: “Eat this bread, drink this cup, come to me and never be hungry. Eat this bread, drink this cup. Trust in me and you will not thirst.”

Alleluia and Amen.