

Today's homily is entitled, "How to be real" with God.

Our Old Testament reading is from Job, a 42-chapter book about suffering and how it tests our friendships and beliefs. It is considered the finest expression of Hebrew poetic genius in the bible. Job is a man that has everything, a wife and ten children, an abundance of land, and livestock, and other precious possessions. The book says, "He had a very large household, so that he was greater than anyone in the East." In terms of wealth, he's on a par with Bill Gates or Warren Buffet. Job is also highly regarded by God. The Lord says to Satan, "There is no one on earth like him, blameless and upright, fearing God and avoiding evil."

But, Satan questions Job's sincerity, he claims that Job is not being "real" with God. So, Satan challenges God to test Job's obedience. God believes in Job and allows Satan to destroy everything good in Job's life, leaving him sick and depressed, yet in the end fully restores him.

In today's reading Job has reached a new low point. He has a skin disease that covers his entire body. He is completely miserable; you can hear it in his words. He says, "Is not man's life on earth drudgery? He is a slave who longs for the shade, a hireling, a hired hand, who waits for his wages." Finally, he says, "My days end without hope." How would we react in Job's situation? We might turn to our friends for support, that's what he did.

Unfortunately, Job's friends fall short of giving him the support he wants. The friends are convinced that Job must have done something terribly wrong and believe that God is just and wouldn't have punished Job without a reason. They chose to judge their friend rather than accompany him in his sorrow.

David Brooks in "How to Know a Person," identifies "accompaniment" as the key to being a supportive friend. Brooks describes accompanying his lifelong friend who suffers and eventually dies from depression. Brooks looks back and realizes that some of his actions, though they came from a place of love, actually made matters worse. For example, he advised his friend on how to spend his time. His friend was a doctor, and Brooks suggested he volunteer again, because previously it brought him joy. It later occurred to Brooks, that it was energy and desire his friend lacked, not ideas about things he should do. His book says, "When you give a depressed person advice about how they can get better, there's a good chance all you are doing is telling that person that you just don't get it."

He writes, "A friend's job in these circumstances is not to cheer the person up, but to acknowledge the reality of their situation, it's to hear, respect, and love them. It's to show them that you haven't given up on them, that you haven't walked away."

Being a friend to a person in need is a lifeline of hope. If Job's friends had shown more empathy, perhaps he wouldn't have been so hopeless. At one time or another we are called

to be a friend to someone who is going through a Job situation. Let's let Christ be our strength when we walk the difficult path with them. After all, Jesus knows a lot about suffering.

Now, let's consider our own lives impacted by a Job situation and how our relationship with God might be impacted. Job is an example of faithful perseverance, yet he still speaks his mind to God, he "gets REAL with God."

He says, "I cry to you, but you do not answer me; I stand, but you take no notice. Yet should not a hand be held out to help a wretched person in distress? Did I not weep for the hardships of others; was not my soul grieved for the poor? Yet when I looked for good, evil came; when I expected light, darkness came." Sometimes, we suffer for a long time and God appears to be absent. But even in those times, it is better to share our true feelings with God, than to curse God for our circumstances. We need to be like Job, to present our case to God and to travel our difficult road with Him.

My Mom suffered from chronic pain for seven months, it started in her back and moved to her hip. She saw a number of doctors, but her condition wasn't improving. She told me her pain got so bad she couldn't concentrate long enough to say her daily prayers. How can you be real with God when pain keeps you from even talking to Him. I was struck by the depth of my Mom's faith. She never directly blamed God, but I could see there were moments of tension in their relationship. Finally, after two surgeries, she is on the mend, returning slowly back to her life and to her daily prayers.

Fr Greg Boyle in his book, "Barking to the Choir," says that God isn't there to take away our suffering, rather to endure it with us. He says, "Some things are random and other things are meant to be in our control. So, God is with me when "stuff happens" and God is rooting for me when I need to decide things. And I'm okay with that. I don't need God to be in charge of my life. I only need God to be at the center of it."

Peter Kreeft calls this, "Practicing the presence of God." The book of Job ends with God reprimanding Job's three friends saying, "You have not spoken rightly concerning me, as has my servant, Job." Kreeft says, "The only answer to why God loved Job's words and attitude more than those of the three friends was because they spoke only ABOUT God, as if He were absent, while Job spoke TO God, in prayer. Job lived in the real world, the world where God is always present, never absent: the three friends did not." Job practiced the presence of God and Job practiced being real with God.

Suffering is hard on relationships, but it is also an opportunity to grow deeper, whether we are in pain or helping a loved one through it. We look to Christ for the strength to be like Job, as we ask for the grace to be real with ourselves, with others, and most importantly with God.