

Sermon: Tab A into Slot B

Year B, Proper 24

[Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45](#)

Offered October 18, 2015 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

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How many of you played with Legos? I mean as kids, not as adults playing with kids? OK, check my memory. As kids, didn't we just get a big bucket of Legos? I can remember big boxes too, with separate compartments. But the cool kids, the ones whose houses you wanted to go to play were the ones with the monstrously huge piles of Lego. Am I wrong?

Now, how many of you have played with Legos recently? Maybe with your own kids or grandkids, maybe with a loaner kid. When did Legos only make one thing? You get a box and it makes a Star Wars fighter or a model of the Forbidden City or whatever. There are some really cool pieces in there. The instruction book goes on for pages and pages. My nephew loved a fire/rescue boat. But it had too many pieces in the early stages and he would get so frustrated. So he would ask me to play Legos. I would sit there with the mass of a bazillion pieces and find the next 10 or 15 he'd need and he'd assemble it. Sometimes I'd have to intervene if he wasn't getting the blocks lined up quite right. In the end, we would have a really fabulous fire rescue boat that neither one of us could have possibly come up with if left to our own imaginations. But you have to take the boat apart fairly carefully because there is no way you can possibly assemble the 800 or so bricks that it takes to make it again if you combined the fire rescue boat with, say, the Emperor's Palace.

When did Lego become the toy of "just tell me what to do?" Don't get me wrong, I loved hanging out with my nephew and making the boat. It improved his hand eye coordination and fine motor skills. He built patience and stick-to-it-ness. And you can make the argument that there are whole sections of life that really run better when you can manage the self-discipline to just put tab A into slot B.

We heard from Job last week, asking for his day in court, asking for an opportunity to put an argument forward to God. If we learn nothing else from the book of Job, it's to be careful what you wish for.

We don't see anything of Job in today's reading. What does anyone remember of his biography? Turn to page 392 (trick about opening a Bible in the middle, end up in the Psalms. Job is right before the Psalms.) So he's from the land of Uz. Anyone know where that is? Of course not. Why would you? Modern Israel comes to a point in the south with Egypt on the west and Jordan on the east. As far as we can tell, that's roughly where Uz was.

[The sheep and all the animals, the servants and even all the kids.] That's saying that Job was stinking rich. [The sons feasting together and inviting their sisters.] When you have an inheritance model which is that the oldest son inherits all his father's holdings and the rest of the sons live off what he is willing to give them, it can make for some really ugly tensions. Feasting together means they get along well. It is kind of code for "Job raised his kids right." But it's the last verse that's really telling. Job would get up early and go through the rituals of atonement, not just for himself but for his kids, just in case. This is a man who believed in Tab A going into Slot B. You tell Job the rules, and he is on it. He is following those rules and he's following them so well that he's following them for his kids, just in case.

So this blameless and upright man (Job 1:1) is tested by God. He loses everything, his wealth, his children, his health. And for 28 chapters, Job keeps asking God, “Why?”. Today we get God’s answer. Not to equate God with my own human failings, but I’ve spent the afternoon with a little human who keeps asking “why?” And after far less than 28 chapters, I’m pretty much ready to speak out of a whirlwind.

Now there’s a lot going on here. It’s poetry and it’s beautiful and powerful language. Different people will point to different things. You can skip ahead to page 420 and see today’s passage, chapter 38, verses 1 through 7 and then 34 to 41. Pick your favorite image. I love “who can tilt the waterskins of the heavens” in verse 37. It’s one gorgeous image after another, all of them images from the natural world. God is challenging Job to explain the workings of the natural world.

You can say, as John Calvin, a founder of our tradition, did, that God is simply telling Job to bow down before God’s power. God can create all this and more and you are just a simple human. Or you can argue that God trying to give Job a sense of how incredibly complex the world is. But I wonder. Job has been driven to his knees by loss and physical suffering and by the comfortless comfort of his four friends for 28 chapters. If God wants Job back on his feet, ready for battle, there’s no point in beating Job down any further. Up to this point Job has been a tab A into slot B kind of guy. Just tell me the rules and I’ll follow them. The world works better that way.

But here’s the thing. What are those parts of life that run better when someone just does what they’re told? I was going to point out that I want a car mechanic that just follows the rules. But I don’t. I want one who knows the rules, but who knows when to break them to coax another 50,000 miles out of my car. A great cook, a cardiac surgeon, an airplane pilot, and nuclear reactor engineer we want them all to follow the rules until it’s time not to. I want a cafeteria lady who knows all the food safety rules and follows them. And I want her to break every rule in the book if there is a hungry kid and she can do something about it. As a society we want all sorts of people to follow the rules, until it’s time not to, until some human purpose can be better served by not following the rules. And isn’t that just a slippery slope to step onto?

I think that is what God is saying to Job. Stop looking for me just in your rituals. Stop looking for me just in who’s thriving economically. Stop trying to figure out why I’m punishing someone because their health is suffering. Know the rules. Know all the rules. But know that they will never define who I am as your God. And they will never define the relationship we can have. Unless you, human, insist on limiting our relationship to the boundaries of the rules. Don’t hide behind the rules, because I am your God and I am far more than the rules.

In the passage from Mark, we see something of the same dynamic. James and John are trying to get Jesus to lay out the rules and make promises based on them. And you can see them talking past each other. Jesus has warned the disciples of his coming death for the third time. James and John assure him that they can drink from the same cup. James and John say that they can have the same baptism. They want to be seated on the left and right hand of God. We know what’s coming. Jesus will be crucified with a criminal on the left and right of him.

James and John and then the other ten want to know the rules. They want to know what they have to do to have the seats of honor. Jesus tells them they have to be servants.

Does that mean they have to be bounded by other people's rules? Think of the last time someone you loved was in the hospital. Aren't the worst nurses the ones who only follow the rules? Think of a great waitress or a great tour guide or a great boss or a great guidance counselor. All of those folks serve, but they serve in a way that is far beyond what the rules dictate.

If we are to be great servants, we need to know what go into making a great life. We have to know how to love god and how to show that. We have to know how to treat others as we would be treated. We have to care for God and one another and all of God's creation from the ravens and the lions and the foolish, foolish disciples who think they know what they're doing and they just don't. God speaks to us through the rules we have — no murder, no stealing, no coveting, lots of honor and care. But God also speaks to us through all creation. If we think up a limit for God, a place where we're certain God won't be, God will be there. And if we break a rule, God will still be there, urging us to put things right and remain in relationship with God and with each other and with God's creation.

We absolutely have to know how to put tab A into slot B. And we have to know when to let all that go and look beyond the rules that are keeping us from God.