

# Emphatic Answers to Persistent Questions

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Gates Presbyterian Church

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Mark 10:35-45 and Job 38:1-7

There are well over one hundred different diets “out there.” Most of us recognize names like Atkins, Jenny Craig, Weight Watchers, but did you know there is a “Cabbage Soup Diet” (hardly very appealing) and even a FatLoss4Idiots.com. Weight loss is a multi-billion dollar industry and people continually ask, “how can I lose weight, lose it safely, effectively, and most, if I lose weight, how can I keep it off?” To those persistent questions, for those who don’t need diets driven by other health issues but are simply overweight, there is one emphatic answer: *eat less and exercise more*. I say “eat less; exercise more” to myself countless times. I know that is the answer, but I want an easier way out of my dilemma. At times, I get frustrated if not angry with myself because I know the solution is to eat less and exercise more. I have even considered a fundraiser for the hungry – taking pledges for so many dollars for each pound I lose.

“Eat less and exercise more” could be stated with a whole range of inflection, across a wide spectrum of intonation from determined and measured words to purposeful to mocking to facetious to sarcastic to downright mad – “come on, Ralph, stop that late night snacking – or taking that extra helping – you don’t need it, you know you don’t, but you keep on eating more than you need anyway!”

Answers, particularly emphatic ones given in response to the persistent inquiries of others or our own questions can be delivered across that same spectrum of intonation – from determined to sarcastic to angry . Just think how often we need to hear the emphatic answers which tell us to

- hate less and love more
- spend less and save more
- need less and savor more
- litigate less and tolerate more (this week a public elementary school in Massachusetts joined schools in Cheyenne, Wyoming and Spokane, Washington in banning all *unsupervised* games of tag, chase and flag football because it might lessen the number of law suits brought by parents whose children are hurt on school property?)

Then there are the words with which we continually struggle as God’s people – how to practice the “art” of war less that we might practice peace more. How, to give you a preview of today’s Second Hour on “just war,” *do* we talk about whether a call to war is justified? There are those who consider the words “just war” an oxymoron. They think no war can ever be justified. ON the other hand, there are those who will name examples in history when resorting to combat was necessary if not essential. In the Year of Our LORD, 2006, some people think the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the recent one between Israel and Hezbelloh just, some who think they aren’t and still others who think there is more than enough justification for sending combat troops to Darfur to end the genocide there, and that the world should have stepped in to stop genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and before that in the “Killing Fields” of Cambodia. Monuments in the former Nazi concentration camps say “Nie Wieder” (“Never Again”) – yet somehow we let it happen over and over again. At what point does caring for these innocents justify going to war?

That which I want us to ponder during worship today is how emphatic God gets with us when we challenge God's ways – and how emphatic God becomes when we challenge God by claiming there are legitimate excuses for hating more, spending more, needing more, litigating more, and going to war more. We don't know the mind of God, but at what point do our cravings deserve more than an emphatic response. When does our behavior merit condemnation?

Last week we looked at the life of Job and realized he went over the proverbial "line" with God. Job had the audacity to claim he could stand face to face with God and change God's mind. In Job's estimation, there was every reason for Job's will to be done. Did you hear the parallel in our Gospel Lesson today? As we heard from the 10<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Gospel of Mark,

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to [Jesus] and said to Him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you. ... Grant us to sit, one at Your right hand and one at Your left, in Your glory." [Mark 10:35, 37]

There is even more to this passage, including how *angry* the other disciples were with James and John. Were they angry because they didn't think to ask as they did, because of James and John's audacity, or was it because now all of them were going to be told if not lectured *once again* how the first would be last and the last would be first. In this instance, Jesus, *once again*, calmly responded to the demands of James and John even though this must have been the umpteenth time they have been told the same message. In this instance, Jesus said it this way:

Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave to all, for the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life for many. [Mark 10:43b-45]

Back to Job and the thesis of last week: that God was patient, *not* Job. After what comprises thirty-seven chapters of Job wringing his hands, whining, listening to his three friends spout easy and cheap answers, and Job forgetting to be humble to the point he challenged God to explain the Creator's behavior, we get nearly three complete chapters of words (in fact, 126 verses) from God in reply. Except for verses 3 through 5 of Chapter 40, Chapters 38 through 41 include some of the most emphatic words from God we read in Scripture. The good news is that this morning you are only going to have to listen to 7 of those 126 verses. Members of the Adult Bible Class could not agree as to the tone of voice with which those words of God might be said. My initial challenge to members of the class was: "you are the director of a play, and you need to give directions to the person speaking God's voice – how are these verses to be read?" Granted, different translations and some versions that are more of a paraphrase use different words in this section and in a few instances, those translations better indicate the degree of the vim and vigor with which the Almighty finally responds to Job.

The first verse of chapter 38 tells us that God speaks to Job out of the storm, out of the whirlwind – and one can not help but wonder if the storm and whirlwind are of Job's own making – that in the swirl of anxiety, the questioning and probing of those three "wonderful" friends (the kind of friends one can do without!) and the whole topsy-turvy nature of Job's predicament that Job has lost all sense of proportion, as though his whole life had been swept up in a storm like that of Dorothy in the swirling house at the outset of the movie "The Wizard of Oz" or as portrayed in the musical "Wicked" that so many of us enjoyed in Toronto yesterday. The second verse of Chapter 38 invites us to wonder if God is speaking in measured tones or if there is some anger,

frustration, facetiousness, perhaps even some mocking sarcasm in these words. Adult Bible Class members were not at all in agreement as to whether God would mock a human being or be sarcastic – but we agreed that perhaps the problem was how we interpreted and heard those words. For *me*, “mocking” and “sarcasm” are not words I associate with God, but listen to this version as found in our Sunday School’s “Contemporary English Version” of Job 38:1-7:

From out of the storm, the LORD said to Job: Why do you talk so much when you know so little? Now get ready to face me! Can you answer the question I ask? How did I lay the foundation for the earth? Were you there? Doubtless you know who decided its length and width. What supports the foundation? Who placed the cornerstone, while morning stars and angels rejoiced?

Our “New Revised Standard Version” translates the second verse this way: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” The class liked the paraphrase “why do you talk so much when you know so little!” Wow! However you intone those words, Job was put in his place. It is almost as though God has been patient long enough and finally puts a divine hand up and says, “Stop! Stop you foolish man! I don’t remember you being present when I created the world, when the first waves lapped against the shore ... I don’t recall you as present when the stars first appeared .... Unless you were there, unless you are like me, a Creating God, unless you can do what I can do and understand time and space and all other dimensions as do I, then just stop talking – and certainly stop talking as though you are my equal!

If we but listen, similar emphatic answers come from God every time we overstep and think we know better than does our God. Emphatic answers come to our persistent if not silly questions

- when we claim we have good reason to hate someone even though we know in our heart of hearts we might hate someone’s sin but *always*, always love each of God’s children, ... we need to hate less and love more,
- when we claim we have to spend money we don’t have for something we probably don’t really need even though we know in our heart of hearts that God knows many ways we could share our wealth if we would just open our eyes to the world’s true needs, ... we need to spend and need less and save and savor life more,
- when we claim somebody else is responsible for whatever we think has gone wrong in our lives ... to the point we go looking for whoever it is that we think we can blame if not sue if not haul into court if not be satisfied in our paltry knowledge that one day, some day, the person who has done us wrong will get “theirs,” ... we need to litigate less and tolerate more of life’s every day issues,
- *and* when we allow our desires and our perspective and our hungers to so drive our individual and corporate psyches that we think it justified to build and saber-rattle with nukes (like North Korea), use oil as a weapon (like Mr. Chavez of Venezuela), fly planes into skyscrapers (like the terrorists), or, worse, *ignore* the desperately innocent victims of genocide in Darfur, the homeless and hungry of our own cities and the world’s forgotten places, or our own rationales for why we use military force where we do – and where we don’t, ... we need to practice the art of war less and perfect the art of peacemaking more,
- ... and the answer to the plight of my being overweight is pretty simple if not emphatic – come on Ralph, eat less and exercise more.

Amen.