

## The Filter

Reading from the Old Testament: Job 19:23-27

Reading from the New Testament: 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Through the years this job has taken me into a good percentage of the hospitals of North Carolina, from Buncombe County in the west to New Hanover County in the east; and yes, I have found myself lost in quite a few of them. Yet, even as dependent as one must be on a map of your typically serpentine medical center, I have never come across a sign as helpful as the sign spied in an elevator by one of our members when visiting a hospital in Georgia. It wasn't about eating options, visiting hours, or hand sanitizer stations. The sign kindly suggested that when visiting a patient, visitors should refrain from telling patients their personal medical stories, positive or negative.

Genius, pure genius! I can't imagine why more hospitals haven't wallpapered their elevators with that sign, thus encouraging people to resist that reflexive impulse which arises whenever you hear someone report an illness or injury. *You have lumbago? Oh, I've had that, well actually, I was misdiagnosed with that, when what I actually had was a cracked vertebra. What was it, L-2 or L-5? I can't remember whether they are numbered top down, or bottom up? Anyway, it took me three months of crippling pain before*

*I was able to get an appointment for a second opinion. And did I tell you about my uncle?* The monologue continues and by the tenth minute, you are reporting on the college applications of your neurosurgeon's son. Meanwhile, you're oblivious to the fact that the patient has passed out from the stabbing spasm. So, where does *passed out* land on the pain scale of 1 to 10?

Why would we think it helpful to respond to someone's pain or fear by telling them how much worse our experience with illness was? *You had a stent put in? Oh, that's nothing. I had two heart attacks, five bypasses, and a pig valve put in my ticker, and I never missed a day of work.*

How is that helpful? Why do we see someone's pain as rationale to make their suffering about us, or worse, as an occasion to heighten their anxiety with horror stories? A member had a melanoma removed, and he told me that when someone heard what the bandage was for, their reaction was something like, "Yeah, my cousin had that. He died." And that is helpful, how?

Our intentions are often good, guided by a desire to be supportive, but our execution sometimes flops. Sure, there are times when sharing

thoughtfully selected nuggets of personal experience with an illness or procedure can be a help, a support, but you have to let the other person ask you what they would find helpful. Something like, *I was once diagnosed with that illness, if you would have any questions about my experience with it, let me know. I'm here.* Be modest in sharing, focused in listening, and sensitive to their frame of mind.

Filters. How do we filter what we say? How do we filter what we hear? In a world beset by the consequences of supply chain shortages, there seems to be an even greater shortage of the kind of filters that are so desperately needed to stem the tide of unsolicited opinions, both incoming and outgoing. When I was a kid, if people weren't gossiping about the Beatles and back masking, they were kvetching over conspiratorial advertisers putting subliminal messages in the previews at the movie theater - *I must have popcorn ... I can't live without Jujefruits.*

There's no need for subliminal anymore. It doesn't matter how unfounded, unexamined, egregiously biased, uninformed, or slanderous a thought is, folks will just say it, claim it, post it as undeniable truth when it is, more likely ... even undeniably ... nonsense. Social media declares

everyone is an expert. Who needs a Walter Cronkite or a Judy Woodruff, when you can buy a cheap microphone for your podcast or post a rant on Instagram to disseminate your own truthy take on the news, drawing conclusions about people you've never interviewed and lands you've never visited?

I know it must drive physicians to distraction. They have to be thinking, *Wait a minute, I've had four years of medical school, five years of residency, two years of research, and two years of fellowship, but **you** read an article someone posted on Facebook.* Where are the filters to save us from the deluge of opinions disguised as truths? Barbara Brown Taylor said, "The problem is that nourishing words are so hard to find – words with no razor blades in them, words with no chemical additives. Most of the words offered to us have been chewed so many times there are no nutrients left in them."

She highlights a character in a John Updike novel, a Presbyterian preacher who lost his faith, and left the parish to sell encyclopedias. Eventually, he lost faith in that, also. He was giving his spiel to a potential customer on the cusp of purchase, "Everything you or your children want to look up, it's in there, if not as a separate article listed in the index." (Barbara

Brown Taylor, *When God is Silent*) When his customer looked as if she might actually buy the thing, his spiel collapsed.

“You don’t want it,” he said. “I swear to you – it’s the last thing you want. All the information there can be, and it breaks your heart at the end, because it leaves you as alone and bewildered as you were not knowing anything.” (John Updike, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*) As a purveyor of words, I recognize the irony of me saying this, but the daily dump of information in which you become buried with just a few clicks on your preferred social media platforms and biased newsfeeds tends to leave you more confused than illumined, more angry than at peace, more self-righteous than humbled, more divisive than reconciled.

Filters. How do we filter what we say? How do we filter what we hear? There is a filter problem addressed in both of our readings from scripture this morning. Scholars reckon that Job is exilic, meaning it was written sometime after the fall of Jerusalem which forced the Israelites into exile in Babylon, having lost their home, their livelihood, and quite possibly, relatives who did not survive the invasion, thus giving them much in common with Job and his multitude of woes. Israel’s question, posed

through Job, concerns the meaning and calculus of suffering. When sensing the seeming silence and inactivity of God, are we to conclude that God is a brutally insensitive power? This same question is raised in a number of the psalms. Where is God when you are suffering?

Well, Job is soon besieged with the confident opinions of superficially well-meaning friends that do little to ease his pain, confusion, and anger. Similarly, Christians in the late first century Thessalonian church are experiencing the growing threat of persecution and much confusion relating to their expectations about Christ's return; and guess what? There too, we find a host of self-proclaimed experts weighing in with over-confident, speciously sourced, and scarcely vetted opinions, offering little clarity and only more confusion.

In Job and 2 Thessalonians there is little listening and an overabundance of talking, opinionating, oversharing, propagating, pontificating, and bloviating.

Job just wants to know that he is heard, that his suffering is not a consequence of his guilt, that his vindicator is there, and that this God cares. "O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book!

O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever! For I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side.”

Perseverance is integral to faith. *I will continue to speak to God, though the evidence calls into question whether God is listening. I will continue to believe, even when my doubts have the upper hand. I will tune out the cacophony of opinions that function only as distraction.* “I know that my Redeemer lives ... I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side.”

Similarly, the author of Thessalonians, entreats readers to set aside the voices of distraction. “We beg you, brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here. Let no one deceive you in any way ... stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us.”

Filters. How do we filter what we say? How do we filter what we hear? Lord knows, there are a lot of well-funded, extensively networked, loud-voiced filters out there that spew a lot of words, few of them helpful,

leaving you more confused than illumined, more angry than at peace, more self-righteous than humbled, more divisive than reconciled.

Yet, there is a filter, trustworthy and true, redeeming and faithful, present and paying attention. Philip said to Jesus, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father ... The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works ... The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

We have a filter. Jesus said, “I am not alone because the Father is with me. I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!”

We have a filter. Faith is seeing the world, seeing our neighbor, seeing ourselves and the events of our lives through the lens of Christ. William Sloane Coffin said, “Faith is ... recognizing that what makes God is infinite

mercy, not infinite control; not power, but love unending. Faith is recognizing that if at Christmas Jesus became like us, it was so that we might become more like him.” (William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*) Through the lens of Jesus, Coffin says, “we see transparently the power of God at work. Watching Zacchaeus climb the tree a crook and come down a saint, watching Paul set out a hatchet man for the Pharisees and return a fool for Christ, we know that our lives too can become channels for divine mercy.” We have a filter, whose name is Jesus, through whom we can find the words that heal and know the peace we can trust. Amen.