



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Louie's Breakdance

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, Job 1:1,2:1-10

October 6, 2024

The Rev. Paul McLain

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

A woman named Laura Newman taught me much about how to live. Laura was a gifted journalist, a brilliant writer, and a doctoral fellow at Carnegie Mellon University. She chaired the wildly popular Riverfest in Little Rock, and still found time to volunteer at St. Vincent's Hospital.

But it was not her external credentials that spoke to me. It was the way Laura lived the last seven years of her life that have changed the way I hope to live mine. At age 48, she was diagnosed with Stage 4 breast cancer. Her first impulse was to feel anger toward God. After all, she felt she had done all the right things. Laura had studied hard and worked hard. She had given back to her community in countless ways. She regularly attended and served her church. Laura kept asking the question, 'What have I done to deserve this?'

In today's Old Testament lesson from Job, God tells us that Job is a blameless and upright man who persists in his integrity. But Satan makes a bet with God. Satan bets that if enough storms and winds of upheaval whirl around and through the life of Job, he will waver and break, and even curse the face of God. In essence, Satan is betting that the integrity of Job is nothing more than a house of cards.

And suddenly the storms bring havoc to Job's life and world. In the course of one day, he loses his thousands of heads of livestock, his many servants, and all ten of his children. And now, to top it all off, he has been inflicted with painful sores all over his skin from head to toe.

Notice that his infliction is a skin disorder. I believe that is significant in this story. Our skin is the outer layer that the world sees. But appearances can be deceiving. Sometimes beauty is skin-deep, and does not match the negative character traits

underneath. Job's skin disorder serves as a metaphor to strip away the barrier between the outer and inner person.

Job wrestled with the questions with which we wrestle:
'If our outward circumstances change drastically,
will we still hold on to who we are at the core of our being?
Even in adversity, will our outward behavior
still reflect our inner belief in a loving God?'

When things are going well, it is easy for us to wear the mask of pretense. We wish to appear virtuous, so that God and the world will continue to reward us. But when the storms and winds bear down on us, the masks are torn off our faces. Our innermost souls are now bare to God and everyone and we become in touch with a greater reality – the reality that a good life is not about reward or punishment. It is instead about living faithfully, step by step in a murky, often unfair world.

Back to Laura Newman, the woman I mentioned earlier. Laura felt deep anger toward God after her diagnosis. But, as she prayed and reflected and talked to friends, she began to see that there is a randomness to cancer. Laura's illness was not due to anything she did. But she discovered that what was **not** random was God's response of care for her and the outpouring of love she received from the community.

Instead of wallowing in self-pity, Laura devoted the final seven years of her life to discovering and sharing her inner beauty – her eternal beauty that came from the divine spark within her. Laura made a pledge to remain faithful to God – no matter what. In fact, she began to look for ways that her journey with cancer may bring her greater depth in her faith journey with God.

Laura reached out in love to those who were newly diagnosed, to share her story of living with this disease and to give them hope. She became more faithful in service as a member of her church and found and offered joy. Laura discovered gifts that she didn't know she had – for needlepoint and playing the handbells. These two practices in communion with others were a source of peace for her – a peace that she radiated and shared.

She appreciated all creatures great and small through her life with Louie, her precious dog, with whom she shared a ministry of pet therapy for hospice patients. She loved to entertain me and other guests by having Louie break-dance on the

kitchen floor! I have no idea how she taught him to do that, or how he learned to do it. I could tell Louie knew that it brought Laura joy.

Near the end of her journey Laura told me that regardless of the outcome, her faith was no longer based on reward or punishment. It was based on constant and never-ending faithfulness – faithfulness to the God whom she loved and served – the God who was always faithful to her, and who would always love her – no matter what. Her beauty was much more than skin-deep. Her beauty radiated from the love of God at her innermost core.

While she at last died at peace, Laura showed me how to live – to live fully and faithfully. I can still picture her smile and laugh as she watched Louie breakdance on the kitchen floor.

I still picture her dancing with God.

Amen.