

## **A Long Obedience in the Same Direction**

The Reverend Mary E. Conroy  
Trinity Church in the City of Boston  
18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
October 8, 2006

One of my favorite authors on the life and practices of faith wrote a book in 1980 that was reissued in the year 2000 on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its publication. It is called *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. I bought it a few years ago because I like this author and while I had read some of his more recent works, I was unfamiliar with this earlier one. I must admit that it sat on my shelf for many, many months before I ever cracked it open. And while like many of you I own more books that I will ever read, it sat there in part I think because the title contained two words that are less than appealing – long and obedience. Drudgery it sounded like and I have always, always been drawn to a faith that is filled with joy and love, good news and hope and salvation. And frankly the words long and obedience are not very appealing. Quick and easy is what most of us want, whether it is in the form of preparing a meal, or filing our taxes, or buying a new car. And maybe most of us, if we were brutally honest, would admit that we want that in our faith life as well. Quick and easy. Our directive to God might go something like this... “Give me faith O Lord and give it to me now. And if you really love me, like the Bible says you do, than you will not allow me or anyone I love to suffer.” Quick and easy life. Quick and easy faith.

Yet there are days and weeks when that title is not only appealing but comforting and this was one of those weeks where nothing seemed quick and easy. There were several hours of waiting on a plane at O’Hare only to have the flight cancelled at 11:30 PM. There was the need to report a lost credit card that same night after scrambling to find a hotel room some 15 miles away. There was an early morning budget meeting and a long, angry letter from a wedding photographer. In other words, just the very ordinary stuff of life. Annoying perhaps, but certainly not the most important stuff of the week. The most important stuff this week happened at the corner of River and Lime Street singing happy birthday toward heaven with a family missing their father and husband. The most important stuff happened on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor of Brigham and Women’s Hospital as another family gathered and prepared for death sooner than they had hoped or planned. And the most important stuff will happens for us whenever we break the bread and drink the cup, and whenever we welcome new members into the Christian community, into living this life with us. We are each of us here, it seems, so that we might make sense of the random string of events of our lives. And even if those things do not and cannot make sense, we are here to hope, to know and maybe to believe, even if only for a fleeting moment, that God is in the midst of them.

A long obedience in the same direction is actually a phrase that the author stole from the philosopher Fredrich Nietzsche who is famous for having announced the death of God and is now long dead himself. Nietzsche saw in his time our culture’s desire to live a quick and easy life and a quick and easy faith. And he wrote these words: “The essential thing in heaven and earth is... that there should be a long obedience in the same

direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living.” (A Long Obedience in the Same Direction, p.17). A long obedience in the same direction is what the life of faith is all about. It is what makes our lives worth living. It is what redeems suffering and loss and senseless acts of violence. It is what allows us to deepen our own faith, our own prayer life so that God is neither the cause of human suffering, nor a paralyzed bystander as it unfolds. Rather God is in everything – joy and sorrow, hope and fear, life and death. God is there in the delivery room and at the deathbed and every moment in between. I think that may be one of the reasons we are so moved by the response of the Amish community to the tragic murders in Nickel Mine this week. There has not been an outcry against God, rather there has been a turning toward God and to the deepest and hardest of Christian values, namely love and forgiveness. It may be why so many of us, of all ages and faiths and no faith at all, have found ourselves having conversations at the water cooler and the dinner table about that precious commodity called forgiveness. Almost before the setting of the sun that day there were stories of the parents of the dead forgiving their children’s killer. Without the usual media barrage of interviews or images of those killed, we are left to do something we rarely get the chance to do in our world. To imagine. To imagine what that forgiveness might mean in our world and theirs and to give thanks for its very strong, yet very silent witness. The long single file line of horse drawn carriages and the echo of horses hooves may be all we will see and hear, but underneath there is for sure, a long obedience the same direction, something that makes life worth living.

In a way, the idea of a long obedience in the same direction ties together the issues raised in all our scripture reading today. Covenanted love and the issues of marriage, divorce and remarriage raised in the Gospel of Mark are about obedience for the long haul. As is the care and welcome of children, as is the story of Job we heard as our first lesson. They were each written for a different time and with a different understanding of life and its purpose. But I want us today to focus on one character, one voice in our time together and that is Job who in fact, comes out of this book looking better than God – a God who places bets with people’s very lives.

For the next several weeks we will hear a series of readings from the Book of Job. Job is one of the great characters of the Bible, well known for his suffering and little else. Ask someone who has spilled their coffee, and had a flat tire and had their cell phone battery die all in the same hour and they may tell you, whether they know the Bible well or not, that they feel like Job. On the surface Job is the patron saint for the “when bad things happen to good people” crowd. We can all identify with Job when we are suffering and when the suffering builds – whether small or large. Layer upon layer of human suffering at the hand of the Divine is what we know of Job and little else. But there is so much more to know about him and, most importantly, about his relationship to God. So here is a little background information. He is the 3<sup>rd</sup> son of Issachar who is mentioned in Genesis. He is a cotemporary of Abraham, the father of the Islam, Judaism and Christianity and is reported to have lived to be 240 years old – if you can call that contemporary. He was the father of 10 children and a wealthy owner of land and livestock - with sheep and camels numbering in the thousands. He was a man who had it all – or so it seemed – until he is caught in what seems like some sort of twisted bet

between God and Satan and everything changed. Job lost it all – his children died, as did his animals. He loses his land and even his health. All the things that marked him as one who was favored by God were taken from him. But the one thing Job never lost was his faith. Righteousness it is called in the Book of Job. A long obedience. He was not a super-hero this Job – just an ordinary man living his life. It did not matter how much or how little he suffered Job never cut himself off from a relationship with God even, and perhaps most importantly, when he rails against God. Even when he demands an answer for all that has happened to him.

Are we able to say the same? Is our relationship with God strong enough that we can rail against suffering even as we endure it? And more importantly, is our own theology of suffering any more advanced than those who lived in the time of Job and of Abraham? Do we not use the words “blessed” to mean free of suffering? I feel blessed that the tests were negative, blessed that my children are smart, blessed that I am out of debt. Rarely, rarely do we hear that cancer or divorce or job loss or tragedies of any kind are blessings. Only occasionally and often in hindsight can we see the grace in any moment. Instead, faith has become for many a sort of spiritual insurance policy. We pay the premium, hoping we never need it but comforted in knowing that it is there.

We are all in this long obedience in the same direction. As one author says, *“For most of us, the worst thing that can happen is not to suffer without reason, but to suffer without God – without hope of consolation or rebirth. All other pain pales in comparison to the pain of divine abandonment and what Job wants us to know is that God does not finally abandon us. When there is nothing left – when all the flocks have been stolen and all the children have been buried – when there is nothing left but a potsherd with which to scratch our sores, there is still left the God of all creation, who never runs out of life and whom we may always ask for more.”* (*Home By Another Way*, Barbara Brown Taylor, p. 166)

Job said it best and said it pretty simply. “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and not the bad?”

Our long obedience in the same direction is toward this very God, the God of the good and the God of the bad, into whose loving arms we fit oh so perfectly. And there is room for all of us there.

Amen.