

## A CIRCLE OF TRUST: AN EXAMPLE FOR *LIVING ROOM* TO FOLLOW

Quaker writer Parker J. Palmer talks about the “circle of trust” he facilitates, a group not unlike what we want our *Living Room* to be. The rules are: “No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight.”

- How do you feel when you receive advice from a friend about how to overcome your depression?

From Eugene Peterson’s introduction to the book of Job in *The Message*:

“Sufferers attract fixers the way roadkills attract vultures. At first we are impressed that they bother with us and amazed at their facility with answers. ...More often than not, these people use the Word of God frequently and loosely. They are full of spiritual diagnosis and prescription. It all sounds so hopeful. But then we begin to wonder. ‘Why is it that for all their apparent compassion we feel worse instead of better after they’ve said their piece?’”

- Why do you think that is?

When Job’s friends came to visit him in response to his suffering, they started out being compassionate:

*...they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.*  
(Job 2:11-13)

Later they became less patient, wanting to fix him:

*“Yet if you devoted your heart to him and stretch out your hands to him, if you put away the sin that is in your hand and allow no evil to dwell in your tent, then you will lift up your face without shame; you will stand firm and without fear.”* (Job 11:13-15)

*"Listen to me and I will explain to you; let me tell you what I have seen..." (Job 15:17)*

*"If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored..." (Job 22:23)*

Eugene Peterson goes on to say:

"On behalf of all of us who have been misled by the platitudes of the nice people who show up to tell us everything is going to be just all right if we simply think such-and-such and do such-and-such, Job issues an anguished rejoinder. He rejects the kind of advice and teaching that has God all figured out, that provides glib explanations for every circumstance. Job's honest defiance continues to be the best defense against the clichés of positive thinkers and the prattle of religious small talk.

"...The book of Job does not reject answers as such. There *is* content to biblical religion. It is the secularization of answers that is rejected—answers severed from their Source, the living God, the Word that both batters us and heals us. We cannot have truth *about* God divorced from the mind and heart of God." (emphasis mine)

- How do you feel when you share your troubles with the group and someone gives advice you didn't ask for?
- What should we as group members do when we feel a need to "set someone straight"?

Some thoughtful and sympathetic advice from Eugene Peterson:

"...instead of continuing to focus on preventing suffering—which we simply won't be very successful at anyway—perhaps we should begin entering the suffering, participating insofar as we are able—entering the mystery and looking around for God...we need to learn from them (people who suffer) and—if they will let us—join them in protest and prayer....shared suffering can be dignifying and life-changing."

Before we give advice, we need to listen with compassion – with a loving spirit.