

I recently ran into a woman I know in Kansas City. I hadn't seen her in about a year, so I asked the usual, "How have you been?" but she did not respond with the usual, "Fine." Instead, she said with an unsteady voice, "Well, in January I had breast cancer." "Are you all right?" I asked. "Yes," she said. "The cancer is gone. The hardest thing was to learn that I am not in control."

God has no favorites. Usually, you expect the bible to say that if God has a favorite, it's the poor and the lowly, the widow and the orphan. Those are the ones for whom God has a special love. Of course, a cynic might say, "Doesn't look like love to me. If God loved the poor, why are they still poor?" The question presumes that happiness comes from having possessions, and everybody should know that true happiness comes from somewhere else.

Today we hear from the Old Testament Book of Sirach, which says, "The Lord is a God of justice, who knows no favorites." Sirach says God hears the cry of the oppressed, but God is "not unduly partial toward the weak." In this passage, God is not unusually kind to the down and out. Your economic status is not a measure of your virtue, whether you are rich or poor. God is looking for something else: service. Sirach continues, "The one who serves God willingly is heard; his petition reaches the heavens." So, if you are poor and selfish, you are not going to get any farther than the rich and selfish do. God will not be unduly kind to you because you are poor. Those who serve, regardless of their financial status and their health, they get somewhere when they pray. Their prayer is like an arrow, Sirach says: It "pierces the clouds and does not rest till it reaches its goal."

Because of our culture, which places so much value on the here and now, and less on the hereafter, we are taught to think that the wealthy are blessed, the poor are cursed; the healthy are happy, and the sick are miserable. But this is not always true. We all know examples of people who have little, or whose health is poor, yet they give a shining example of happiness and peace. It is hard to know how they do it. Well, they probably have a deeper source of peace that does not rely on the here and now. They live for others. They give their resources for the good of the next generation. This provides another clue that explains why their prayer is so effective. When they pray, they aren't concerned about material goods; they are concerned about what really matters, the things that bring inner peace. The Most High responds to those prayers, to the prayers of the just, keeping the world in balance, protecting all of creation from ultimate harm.

We are not in complete control of our health, the opinions of other people, the actions of those we love, or whatever the day may bring. We are in control of our service to others and our prayer to God. If we serve, our prayer will be noticed on high.