

WHY??? WHY DO THE INNOCENT SUFFER?

Romans 8:31-39

A young mom is in the last stages of colon cancer, totally convinced that God will heal her, and she will be able to see her 10- and 13-year-old boy and girl graduate from High School, she refuses a visit from the chaplain. Three days later, she dies. You tell her kids:

- A. Your mom is in a better place.
- B. God needed your Mom more than you did.
- C. Everything happens for a reason.
- D. You say nothing, instead you just hug her kids and let them soak your shirt with their tears.

A college sophomore is traveling on Spring Break with the Trekking Club from his school when their bus hits black ice in Nebraska demolishing the van and killing the promising 19-year-old instantly. You say to the grief-stricken parents:

- A. God needed another angel in heaven.
- B. This is part of God's plan for his life.
- C. It is not our place to question God.
- D. You are present to the parents as they wail and cry out to God, "How could you let this happen?"

A young man who is finally turning his life around spins out of control on 81 South during a snowstorm, hits a bridge abutment and is killed. You say to the young man's friends:

- A. He is in a better place.
- B. Everything happens for a reason.
- C. This is going to make you a better person.
- D. You share the grief of the parent and his friends holding them all and hold them in their grief.

And finally, 26-year-old 6 months pregnant Mom-to-be suffers a fatal heart attack which kills both her and her unborn child. You say to her shattered husband and family:

- A. God never sends you more than you can handle.
- B. There must be something in your life you need to confess to God. God must be punishing you for a reason.
- C. Everything happens for a reason.
- D. You are speechless as you quietly sit with her family.

These are just a few of real-life ministry situations I have faced in my first 15 years as a United Methodist Pastor – and tragically, the first three responses are often the typical responses from well-meaning Christians. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know the final choice in each of these situations should always be our response. Yet, isn't it true that whenever we encounter such life shattering tragedies, we find our own faith reeling, and we flounder to find words of comfort for family and friends?

This morning marks the first of the sermon series based on the Rev. Adam Hamilton's book "Why? Making Sense of God's Will." Through Hamilton's book and a search of the Scriptures, we will study the theological concept known as "Theodicy," which is the Greek word for our human attempt to reconcile belief in a loving and powerful God with the suffering present in our world; or more commonly stated, "Why do bad things happen to good people, and why do the innocent suffer?"

How often have you heard from non-believers in the face of natural disasters such as the 2004 Tsunami in Indonesia and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and tragedies such as September 11th, 2001 in New York City, Pennsylvania and the Pentagon in D.C. and the day none of us will ever forget when a mentally ill young gunman entered into Sandy Hook elementary school systematically killing 20 innocent children and 6 educators. "How can your loving God allow this to happen? Where was your God when those jets crashed?" Indeed, even the most seasoned pastor struggles to answer these questions.

The Reverend Adam Hamilton states, "Suffering, unanswered prayers, and the unfairness of life naturally lead us to question God's goodness and sometimes to question God's very existence." Some of you may feel it heresy to even make such a statement, but if we are honest, we have all struggled and continue to struggle with the presence of such evil in our world, and how God fits into these tragedies that shake us to our very core.

The very basis of our disappointment with God in the face of suffering generally is found at our "assumptions" of how God is supposed to work in our world. "When God does not meet our expectations, we are disappointed, disillusioned, and confused." Could it be that our own understanding of who God is and what we expect from God is slightly skewed?

Have you been raised with the belief that the Bible teaches that if you believe in God and try to be a good person then God will take care of me, bless me, and nothing bad will happen to me or my family? Well, you are in good company, but I hate to tell you that such teaching is decidedly non-Biblical. We only have to take a look at some of the major Biblical characters to quickly realize that the God-seekers and followers of the Old Testament were anything but protected from the evils of this world. Consider Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers and enslaved to the Egyptians for 400 years. And what about Job, the epic story about a good and faithful man who suffers terribly yet refuses to give up his faith.

There is Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace, Daniel thrown into the lion's den, and at the very center of the New Testament we have Jesus who is beaten and abused and finally nailed to the cross. His first disciples were all put to death for their faith! Do you still believe that if you believe in God and try to be a good person, not only will nothing bad happen to you, but you will be blessed beyond measure?? The Bible certainly does NOT support this belief. Please realize we will only be able to touch the surface of this topic confined to a 15-20-minute sermon, but I hope this does begin to bring some clarity to your puzzling question of the presence of God in the face of evil.

One of the most pervasive and non-Biblical responses to the presence of evil in our world that is perpetrated by none other than well-meaning Christians is the idea the “Everything happens for a reason!” If I accomplish only one thing in each ministry appointment it is my prayer that I help do away with this misguided assumption in your walk with Christ. I genuinely understand that these words do bring comfort to some, and I would never ask a person to change this. However, have you ever wondered exactly what is meant when these words are said, or how do you understand these words if we are the recipient of this pat statement?

Central to this statement is the belief that “God does or must have a plan. We cannot yet see that plan, but somehow the suffering you are going through now is powerful and God has a good reason for it. Just trust God!” Let’s look at this logically. When these words are uttered, they essentially mean, “God planned for this tragedy to come to you. God willed for this thing to happen.” Think about this...if God willed it to happen, then God actually caused it to happen. God wrote this event into your life story...therefore it “must be God’s will for your life!” Do you really believe that those kindergarten and first grade students at Sandy Hook were murdered because this was part of their life story and their parent’s story? When we follow this kind of logic then, we are basically saying God wished for this to happen, so God must have put it into the heart of the murderer to do this terrible thing. When you or others say, “Everything happens for a reason,” or “It must have been the will of God,” you are saying that God intended for this event to happen. How can this be?

It further grieves my heart when clergy, use these tragedies to promote their own distorted theology saying, “If prayer had not been taken out of our schools, Sandy Hook would not have happened.” Well they may serve a vindictive and vengeful God, but I don’t. Also consider this, when these kinds of comments are made, aren’t the speakers violating the third commandment (prohibiting the misuse of God’s name) by misrepresenting the nature and character of God? When non-Christians hear Christians say things like this, they are left with an impression of God that is hardly loving and just, but instead a picture of God who wills evil and suffering into the world.

So then how do we make sense of this? How do we reconcile God’s goodness with the suffering we experience in our world? Hamilton offers three foundational ideas to help us make sense of God’s will. The first is that God has given human beings “dominion” over the planet. God has placed us in charge of God’s good creation, making us responsible for what happens here.

The second point, which I believe undergirds most of the evil and tragedies in our world is the truth that what makes us human is our ability to choose right from wrong. Our free will is not only a gift from God but also, God will never, ever violate our free will. This freedom, however, comes with unlimited possibilities that we just might choose a course of action that will lead to suffering in our own lives and in the lives of others. As a child of the 60’s and 70’s a common phrase often spoken to justify poor choices was, “it is not hurting anyone else if I...” You fill in the blanks.

How many lives were changed forever with unwanted pregnancies, tragic deaths from people who got behind the wheel after drinking, good minds destroyed through drug use, not to mention in our day and time – talking on the phone and or texting while driving! Then there are the choices we make in our lifestyle that affects our very health and well-being...the list is virtually endless.

And finally, human beings have a tendency, to be drawn to that which is not God's will or plan...AKA sin! The Hebrew and Greek words most translated by the English word, "sin" means to "stray from the path" or "to miss the mark." The path here is God's path; the mark is God's will for humankind. Even the best of us seem to be drawn to do the very things that will harm our lives and the lives of those around us. The story of Adam and Eve is the perfect Biblical account for all of human behavior. As Hamilton states, "This tendency towards sin permeates every part of the human experience. It leads dictators and tyrants to abuse their people; it leads men and women to violate their marriage covenants; it results in people worshipping the idols of money, sex, and power instead of God and leading godly lives."

At this point, you may be wondering about my choice of the passage from Romans and how it relates to my message. To me, Romans 8:26-39 is a message of hope we need to hear every time we make choices which ultimately harm others and ourselves. We need to be assured that in spite of our missing the mark, God is always with us. We need to know the good news that when we find ourselves at the receiving end of the results of others straying from God's path that not only is this not the will of God for our lives, but God is with us through every step, every nuance and every hurt in our lives. Romans eight speaks volumes to me that no matter what I have done in my life, God is with me and welcomes me with open arms whenever I turn to God – whether out of repentance, grief, fear, loneliness...etc. Engrave these words in your minds and write them on your hearts. "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose; What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us; Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? And finally: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Next week we will take a further look at God's providence and human suffering and the relationship of the God of love, just and mercy to very real tragedies in the world today. In the meantime cling to the truth and words of the God of love from Deuteronomy 31:6 – "Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them, because it is the Lord your God who goes with you; he will not fail you or forsake you." And the promise of Jesus from Matthew 28:20 immediately following the Great Commission where he tells the disciples and us to, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. ***And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.***" In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.