

WHY?? DECISIONS, DECISIONS, DECISIONS

2 Corinthians 4:7-5:1 and 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

“I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows – was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong”. 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 (NRSV)

My maternal Grandmother, Cecile Laurent came to the United States, from her home in Nancy, France when she was 24 years old. She traveled by ocean liner with her Maman to marry my Grandfather Eddie Lajoie. Mamie, as we called her, could be a force to reckon with. An only child, she was surprisingly not spoiled. Often lonely growing up, she resolved that she and her beloved Eddie were going to have a large family, and when the 12th child came along, Mamie’s family was complete.

Mamie was nothing if not totally pragmatic. She ran her household with almost military precision and was quick to squelch any kind of rebellion among her 12. She had some favorite expressions which became part of some of my strongest childhood memories. God help the whiny child who encountered Mamie. Whining was not to be tolerated and whenever I or one

of my dozens of cousins resorted to this childhood manipulative behavior, Mamie was quick to say, “Veut tu une bonne claque?” Or “would you like a good slap?” Bilingual or not, every one of Mamie’s 26 grandchildren learned early on the universal language of this phrase. Fast on the heels of this one, is a phrase I heard often – “Tant pis pour elle!” Loosely translated as “too bad for her!” This phrase ranked right up there with Mamie’s overriding childrearing philosophy: The pity train has just derailed at the corner of suck it up buttercup and move on, and crashed into “we all have problems” before coming to a stop at “pull up your big girl/big boy undies and deal with it.” But Mamie could also lavish love on her grandchildren. Each summer we all had a chance to spend a week with Mamie and Pappie where we had their undivided attention – a true treat in child’s life living in a large family. During these times, Mamie would often make the visiting grandchild a “Coffee Cab,” every afternoon. Rhode Island is famous for Coffee Milk and Coffee Cabinet. It is said that if you travel more than 10 miles from Rhode Island, people will not know what this drink is. If you are from Rhode Island and live somewhere else, you crave it! A coffee cab is made from coffee syrup, vanilla ice cream and milk. It was called a “cabinet” because the unknown originator kept his or her blender in a kitchen cabinet. She would also give us the treat we came to know as a “sucre de kirsch” – soaking a sugar cube in kirsch liqueur which we would then pop in our eager mouths where it would slowly dissolve.

As a devout Roman Catholic, Mamie had been heavily influenced by Jansenism – a Catholic theological movement, primarily in France, that emphasized original sin, human depravity, the necessity of divine grace, and predestination. One of the principles that had been engraved on Mamie’s psyche was the concept of victim soul. Victim Souls comes from a Roman Catholic teaching on redemptive suffering. A victim soul is an individual who has been chosen by God to undergo physical, and sometimes spiritual, suffering beyond that of normal human experience. The victim soul willingly accepts this unique and difficult mission of offering up his or her pains for the salvation of others. And Mamie was no stranger to suffering. While visiting her family in France, her first son after three girls in succession was stricken with meningitis and died in a matter of days. Henry was 22 months old. Grief

stricken – she returned home where six months later the next in line, Marie Terese died during a flu pandemic. After several more girls, her second son, Laurent was born with Down’s syndrome which was not a positive event back in the 1930’s but a cause for shame. In September 1949 her daughter Henriette, my mother, and infant granddaughter, Monique, were stricken with polio and in 1950 her 16-year-old daughter, Bernadette died from Leukemia.

Although Jesus Christ accomplished our redemption once and for all by suffering torture and crucifixion for our sins, Scripture also affirms the value of human suffering. Christ points to this value himself when He says, “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me”. (Mark 8:34) Perhaps more pointedly, St. Paul writes that we are “heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him”. (Romans 8:17) In Philippians 3:10-11 Paul also says “I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”

Universal human experience affirms that the crosses some people bear are much heavier than our own. The pains of this life – or, to put a positive spin on it, the opportunities for redemptive suffering – are not distributed equally or even proportionately among humankind. Redemptive suffering is the Christian belief that human suffering, when accepted and offered up in union with the Passion of Jesus, can pay the just punishment for one’s sins or for the sins of another. Like an indulgence, redemptive suffering does not gain the individual forgiveness for their sin; forgiveness results from God’s grace, freely given through Christ, which cannot be earned. This is primarily an Orthodox Catholic belief and one that my Grandmother fully embraced. With this rather long preamble, we are taking a look in this third week of the series on “Why?” specifically at “suffering caused by human decisions” – that is suffering caused by our own decisions or the misuse of our freedom and other’s misuse of their freedom.

I have already talked about the gift of free will we have all been blessed with as children of God – and just as earthly parents essentially have no control

over their children once they leave the family nest – God won't control our freedom. God will never take our freedom from us, nor does God miraculously deliver us from the consequences of our actions or the actions of others. No matter our age – every day brings with it a plethora of decisions we can make – good, bad or indifferent – and the one thing, hopefully, each one of us learns at an early age is that there are consequences of the decisions we make. For example, some children are what Vern calls, 'hard learners'. Some children can be told not to go near the hot stove or iron because it will hurt them and obey, while others just cannot seem to resist touching the hot surface – the consequence of this? Correct – painful burns that can warrant a trip to the ER. These are the hard learners who will go through life pushing the envelope to the max – this is not an easy life to live, and truthfully – a hard learner is his or her own worst enemy.

The long and short of it is that God gives us freedom to make our own decisions and sometimes we make wrong decisions with painful consequences. While this is a true downside of free will – an even greater downside are those decisions we make that have painful consequences for others. As human beings created with this free will, we value this freedom practically above everything else. Part of the risk God took in giving us this freedom is that we might and probably will misuse that freedom to do the very things that break God's heart. We may lull ourselves into thinking that our choices hurt no one but ourselves – but this is rarely, ever the case. I have already presented the disastrous scenarios which occur when a person chooses to drink and drive or talk on the phone while driving and definitely the dangers of texting and driving. But all three occur on a daily basis at a truly frightening rate. In my own travels, I see this happen every single day.

Historically we have the gruesome statistics of decisions made by a person misusing their freedom of choice that has destroyed not only lives – but whole populations. While Middle Eastern terrorists under the reign of Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, and now Isis have had no regard for the sanctity of human life – there is the less well known Rwandan genocide in Africa where an estimated 500,000 – 1,000,000 Tutsi were killed by members of the Hutu majority during an approximate 100-day period from April 7 to mid-

July 1994; constituting as much as 70% of the Tutsi and 20% of Rwanda's total population. Why? Because of decisions made by human beings. And here it must be noted that while we can console ourselves by saying these were largely the decisions of a small, small minority in each population; the fact remains, particularly in the case of the Holocaust of WWII it was not simply one man who did this horrible thing; it was millions of people who actively participated in supporting the Nazi efforts, and it was tens of millions who remained silent rather than stand up for the Jewish people and the many others who were persecuted and killed by the Nazis. (Hamilton) Thank God for the Corrie ten Boom's, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's, and Oskar Schindler's who made the decision not to stand idly by and watch this happen.

What does this all have to do with a Christian understanding of suffering and why does God allow this to happen? Basically, each and every day we have the freedom to make choices, choices that potentially help or harm both individuals and whole groups of people. I have touched on the most extreme but there are the daily decisions everyone makes how we care for our bodies; what we eat, what we drink; what kind of pharmaceuticals, drugs both prescribed and recreational or to exercise or not to exercise. The head knows the good and bad things, yet we often choose to do the very thing that hurts and harms. Again Romans 7:19, "For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing".

This morning the apostle Paul gives us a word on suffering from 2 Corinthians 4:7 – 5:1, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body". Jumping down to verses 16-18, Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things

which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal”.

While the context of this letter to the church at Corinth was written to the infant church who was challenging Paul’s apostolic authority – the matter at hand was the leadership of the church at Corinth seemingly offering the power to perform miracles and a level of spiritual holiness they achieved in contrast to the sacrificial life Paul was offering. A contemporary example which comes to my mind is the Prosperity Gospel the popular religious doctrine which emphasizes the importance of personal empowerment, proposing that it is God’s will for his people to be happy. Here, reconciliation with God is interpreted to include the alleviation of sickness and poverty, which are viewed as curses to be broken by faith. This is believed to be achieved through visualization and positive confession and is often taught in mechanical and contractual terms. I believe this is a modern-day heresy preached by the Joel Osteen’s of our world. This teaching places the bulk of our Christian walk on the self and not on Christ, which is what was going on in the church at Corinth. Paul strongly reminds the church in this letter that the proof of God’s activity is the grace that sustains us even in our weakness, for it is in those moments that we recognize the power is not our own but must come from God. Boasting in our own power is foolishness and accomplishes nothing; boasting in our weakness may just remind us that “the power of Christ” also resides within us.

Those who preach the prosperity gospel need to consider the following words: “A principal reason many people avoid darkening the church door, says Eric Elnes, is because they’ve absorbed a distorted message from other churches they’ve known in the past. This false message goes like this: “It is possible to arrive at a set of beliefs and/or practices that will ensure that your struggles will be over. Life will never hurt you; the rug will never again be pulled out from under your feet; the bottom will never drop out; and you will never again experience the pain of failure, uncertainty, ‘lostness’ or temptation.” When life deals them a lousy hand these folks feel hoodwinked by this oversimplified message. Elnes goes on: “The message people are yearning to hear is not that their struggles will magically disappear

if they just have a little more faith. They seek a faith that provides a context in which their struggles become meaningful, and thus hopeful.”

This month’s newsletter contains a book review of one such person. The title of the book is Everything Happens for a Reason – and Other Lies I Have Loved. The author is Kate Bowler who is a professor at Duke Divinity School with a modest Christian upbringing. Kate specializes in the study of the prosperity gospel, the creed I just mentioned that sees fortune as a blessing from God and misfortune as a mark of God’s disapproval. At thirty-five, everything in her life seems to point toward “blessing”. She is thriving in her job, married to her high school sweetheart, and loves life with her newborn son. Then she is diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer; and her world is turned on its proverbial ear.

The prospect of her own mortality forces Kate to realize that she has been quietly subscribing to the prosperity gospel, living with the conviction that she can control the shape of her life with “a surge of determination”. Even as this type of Christianity celebrates the American can-do spirit, it implies that if you “can’t do” and succumb to illness or misfortune, you are a failure. Kate is very sick, and no amount of positive thinking will shrink her tumors. What does it mean to die, she wonders, in a society that insists everything happens for a reason? Kate is stripped of this certainty only to discover that without it, life is hard but beautiful in a way it never has been before.

Just as many of the Biblical heroes, Kate moved from uncertainty to clarity – a better way to say this might be that she moved from uncertainty to trust. She moved not from failure to success, but from ‘failure’ to faithfulness; trusting the Savior who promised He would never leave her or forsake her.

The bottom line rests totally in the human condition – we are living in a broken world and live in broken bodies that get sick, wear out and eventually expire. Next week we will take a look at the question, “Why Do My Prayers Go Unanswered?” In the meantime, I want to leave you with a story from a well-known local man in my last appointment who learned the painful lesson that it is ONLY through the grace of God that we are able to move forward day in and day out.

This story involves a young boy living in Fairfield on Sterrett Road. One day he and his older sister set out on their bicycles from their home to climb the steep hill along the fence line of the farm. They were forbidden to ride on this road but wanted the exhilarating experience of careening down the hill toward their home on the return trip. They only went a short distance when the boy was fatally hit by a car. His Dad, a very devout Christian, cried out to God – “Why?” Why have you taken my son? Why?” Here is the story in the grieving father’s own words as I remember them, “I had prayed to God every day for my children. God use my children for Your glory, not my glory”. The day Marty was killed, I asked God over and over, ‘Why, Why, WHY?’ That night I was taking a shower, when I heard God as clearly as if God was standing right beside me. “Your prayers were answered”. From that moment on, I never asked ‘why?’ and a peace came over me.” Friends I share this story with you for two reasons. Marty and his sister made a decision that was fatal for him. Their Dad also made a decision to be comforted by God’s grace. For him, God’s grace was sufficient in his human weakness. Is it easy? –

Never. Do we like it? – Heck no! Is it part of the human condition? Very much so, and it is the best I can do in my own human limitations to help you all deal with the question: “Why do the innocent suffer.” In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.