

WHY?? THE HUMAN CONDITION

Genesis 3:6-19

This morning we will finish up the sermon series based on Adam Hamilton's book, *Why? Making Sense of God's Will*. Our last category is human suffering caused by sickness. From Adam Hamilton, "Why, when we become ill, many of us ask, 'Why me, God?' as though human sickness is a punishment from on high. God could punish people in this way, but I suggest that if we take seriously the idea that Jesus Christ bore on the cross the punishment for sin, then we should be very careful when suggesting that God has made us sick." (Hamilton 25)

Here follows a story from Leslie Weatherhead, one of the great preachers of the twentieth century, told about his time as a missionary in India. "A young Indian man he was ministering with had a daughter who had just died of cholera. The young man, with great resignation and grief, said, "It must have been the will of God." Weatherhead stopped him and said, "John what would you think if someone had crept into your veranda by night and held a germ-covered cloth over your daughter's mouth?" The man became indignant, "Such a man would be a monster!" Weatherhead replied, "but John, haven't you just accused God of doing the very same thing?" (Hamilton 25)

Hmm...think about it...quite frankly, sickness is just not God's way. If it were, why would Jesus have spent so much of his time on earth healing the sick? If sickness and suffering were God's way, one would expect Jesus to make them sicker! God created our bodies to withstand amazing trials and abuse. The life expectancy of human beings has risen and continues to rise with better medicine and surely with better hygiene and healthy lifestyles. In 1900, the average life expectancy for a man was 46.3 years, women – 48.3 years. Today the average life expectancy is 82.19 years – nearly double! Our bodies have an amazing capacity to repair themselves – and all too often we treat our bodies as if they are indestructible – which they are not. Every human being has the potential for disease and sickness, injury and death – this is part and parcel of having flesh and blood bodies. The theological term for this is "the human condition." Part of the risk of living is that we might get sick and we all eventually die to this life. This is not God's doing, it is simply part of having human bodies that wear out in a world like ours and sometimes due to our own way of living.

Our scripture text this morning tells the story of the first sin of humankind – where the first man and woman disobey God doing exactly the ONE thing God told them NOT to do. It doesn't matter who disobeyed first...they both were wrong... This isn't a debate over the sexes, but rather the account of how our bodies started having an expiration date.

Genesis 3:6-19 is one of the foundational stories of the whole Bible and of our whole human condition. Let's take a look at these verses and their connection with the human condition. God says, "You may freely eat of every tree in the garden" (v. 16). *Every* tree! That's permission. God isn't just getting Adam to slog through and do all the work. God's giving Adam the freedom to enjoy the fruits of divine creation! And one of these fruits is from the Tree of Life. Remember that Adam was created mortal, made from dust. It was the fruit of the Tree of Life that was not only good to eat, *it gave him life*. It was the antidote to death and Adam was free to eat as much as he wanted.

Every tree except one. There was one tree that was off limits, and of it God says, “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat of it, you shall die” (v. 17). Freedom plus boundary. Eat all you want, when you want, where you want – except this one tree.

So, why is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil forbidden to Adam? After all, it seems like that knowledge would be a good thing, right? It might help us in those morally ambiguous dilemmas to be able to munch on a piece of that fruit and know what we ought to do. But it’s not the choice between good and evil that’s the focus here. The real choice is whether these humans will trust God. Will Adam and Eve trust God’s wisdom or their own? Do they want the world God gave them, or do they prefer a world of their own making?

And so, we know what happens. The result is nothing less than the unraveling of God’s created work. What was in order, what was “very good” will now begin to run backward from the way God intended it, and it’s been running that way ever since. This story reminds us of the way things are *when humans choose to run the world on their own*. The rest of the chapter is all about what happens to humans and to all of creation as a result – what happens is known to us as the “human condition.” When Adam and Eve choose to violate the prohibition and break the covenant with God, the whole creation project starts falling apart. (Homiletics Online, 2015). We did this to ourselves.

What remains a puzzle to all is why certain people seem to have endless time on earth while others leave us way too young. Again, we can look to the Psalmist who states further on in Psalm 139:14-16 – “*For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed*”.

What are you to make of these passages from scripture? Do you develop a fatalistic view of life living by the motto, “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!” Or do you treat your bodies as Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 – “*You surely know that your body is a temple where the Holy Spirit lives. The Spirit is in you and is a gift from God. You are no longer your own. God paid a great price for you. So use your body to honor God*”.

Whether you are in the medical profession, a pastor, or just the average person on the street...a quick stroll down the street or a visit to the grocery store of your choice in the US of A speaks volumes that the prevailing culture is one that has no idea what it means to treat the body as the ‘temple of the Holy Spirit!’ Is this what God planned for his good creation? What do you think? Yet, when bodies begin to fail, too many humans ask “Why?” Why did God make me sick? Why is God punishing me?” The short answer, of course, is “God did not do this to you!” The long answer, or rather question each person needs to seriously consider is, “how much of this is my own doing?”

As one of the loveliest women in my first appointment lay dying from lung cancer in the local hospital, she said to me, “I know all my years of smoking were not good for my body, but I have no regrets.” That was probably the most honest and refreshing attitude I have ever

encountered. Becky had quit smoking at least 5 years before she was diagnosed with lung cancer – yet it was too late for her body to recover completely, and she fully accepted her part in her illness.

But what of lung cancers patients who have never ever had a cigarette or lived in a smoke-filled environment? I think of Dana Reeves, wife of the late Christopher Reeves, who died a very premature death due to non-smoking related lung cancer. What of the persons who do everything right living healthy active lives? Runner Jim Fixx comes immediately to my mind. Fixx was an American who authored the 1977 best-selling book *The Complete Book of Running*. He is credited with helping start America's fitness revolution, popularizing the sport of running and demonstrating the alleged health benefits of regular jogging. He died of a heart attack while jogging at 52 years of age. His genetic predisposition for heart problems and other previous lifestyle factors may have caused his heart attack. (Incidentally, Fixx died while jogging in the small Vermont town of Wolcott!)

Even more difficult are the innocent who become ill through common everyday childhood diseases like measles, mumps and rubella. Where IS God in the midst of these often tragic conditions? While my mom was a complicated woman at best, the one thing that always amazed me was her stalwart faith in God. Not once in all my life did I ever, ever hear mom blame God for the polio that forever changed her life! She readily blamed my physician father, but God? Never. Not once.

And here lies the crux of how we as Christians should always look at the human condition. When the first man and woman decided to disobey God – the pattern was set for all humankind that every subsequent fearfully and wonderfully made human body was mortal and would eventually wear out and die through a wide variety of causes. The temptation is great on our part to think and say, “I was not in that garden, why do I have to suffer because of what someone else did!” The bitter truth is that we behave exactly like the first man and woman each and every time we behave contrary to how God would have us live our lives – whether we stuff our bodies full of food at an ‘all you can eat’ buffet, use recreational drugs, or are negligent in practicing preventative health measures with healthy eating, regular physicals and exercise. And...this is only one miniscule way in which we continue to live contrary to God’s plan for each and every aspect of life.

The long and short of it can be found in Romans 3:23 and Romans 6:23 – “*for we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*”. It is NOT God’s plan for you to get sick – not at all...often a long hard honest look is needed – are we truly living as God ordained from the very beginning of time? As I previously shared – there are always consequences for our actions – and truly some of the calamities in our lives are our own doing. The small percentage of the innocent who become sick with no rhyme or reason – can only be explained by the sad reality of the human condition.

One final word about the Christian platitude that I loathe: “Everything happens for a reason.” When I received my breast cancer diagnosis, the people who did the most ‘damage’ in trying to make me feel better were my fellow seminary students! We were three weeks away from graduation and I shuddered at the thought of turning my fellow graduates loose on the poor

unsuspecting people in their parishes. Oh yes, I heard my ‘favorite’ saying, but I also heard incredible statements like, “This will make you be a better pastor!” “Think of all the breast cancer patients you can help with this!” And the best one from a fellow student who was praying for me: “O Lord, I know what it is to be given a death sentence!” Thankfully there were treasured faculty members who were able to sit with me in the ashes without trying to make me feel better; recognizing my fear and future uncertainty of my ministry.

Except for the third statement, were my colleagues wrong? Being a cancer survivor has made me a better pastor and in particular I have been able to give much support to my breast cancer sisters in the faith. Still my inward being struggled with ‘everything happens for a reason,’ until one day I remembered the story of Joseph and his brothers. To refresh your memory – Joseph in the Old Testament was the overconfident younger son of Jacob. He was known to his older brothers as their father’s favorite and could be quite arrogant lording it over his brothers. For this reason, his 10 older brothers conspired against the boy and sold him to slave traders, while telling their father the boy had been mauled by an animal. Joseph had been given dreams of God’s plan for his life; so, with confidence and strength, he endured. During the years of famine, Joseph’s brothers came in search of grains and foods to keep their people from starvation. Not recognizing their young Hebrew brother as this matured and prominent Egyptian, he ordered them to return with their younger brother. When the brothers returned with Benjamin, Joseph revealed his identity. The brothers suffered from great remorse of their actions and Joseph forgave them. It was a joyous reunion between a grieved father and lost son. His brothers still could not understand why Joseph did not seek revenge. Joseph responds in Genesis 50:20, “*As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today*”.

Whenever evil falls upon me or those I love, I have learned to persevere as did Joseph. Almost without fail, over time, I have been able to see God bring good out of the evil. Whatever we face in this life, through it all – God is with us. Bottom line – suffering never has the final say in the Christian faith. As I have said from the beginning of this series – Christianity does not promise that we will not suffer, but it does promise that suffering will never have the final word. The Israelites were freed from slavery. The Blind Beggar, along with many others in the life of Christ, was healed. And on the third day, Jesus rose from the dead. If you learn nothing else from this series, please learn this – ***God does not bring unjust suffering upon God’s children. But God will, however, force such things to serve God’s purposes. God WILL walk with us through the fires and floodwaters. And God PROMISES that “the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us.”*** (Hamilton 29)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.