

“Where is God When We Suffer?”

Psalm 13; John 11:1-45

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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A husband and wife and their children struggle with his cancer. He has outlived the doctor’s predictions; yet his days of confusion and disorientation are such that, on a good day, he looks at me and says “Pastor, this is not living.”

Across the table are the stonewalled feelings of a mother and two daughters. “He was only nineteen,” one sister said of her brother, decapitated the day before in a motorcycle accident while serving in military service thousands of miles away.

“Some days I don’t know whether I wish they’d live or die” the woman in her forties said to me. Mother of two healthy children, she is also the mother of two children whose brain and birth defects require continual institutional care. The parents are faithful in their visits yet filled with anxiety, guilt and despair.

An active church member, dearly loved, is greatly grieved in death. A nearby family marvels. Their loved one is older but the epitome of selfishness. “Where is the justice?” they wonder.

A family struggles with Dad’s encroaching dementia, an unfair end to an active and loving life. His wife cares for him at home but neglects her own health, to her children’s great alarm.

A marriage of over 25 years collapses despite all the husband can do to keep it together. Another promising marriage collapses when the bride realizes she is only another object in her husband’s collection toward status and success. A third marriage fails under the stress of the death of their youngest child, a ten year old son who dies overnight after contracting a rare virus.

I wish I could say these vignettes are part of the thickening plot of a sensational new paperback or a daytime soap opera. They

are not. They are realities from the lives of people in the churches and communities I have served. Suffering is a part of life. Along with the proverbial death and taxes is the inevitability of suffering.

Sure, some suffering is predictable and understandable. The person who smokes for 30 years and gets lung cancer; the child who runs in front of a car and is hit; the person whose compulsive addictions cause the loss of all that is dear. These situations are sad, painful and also require pastoral care; yet there appears to be some order in them in their pattern of cause and effect.

More provocative is suffering which serves no grand purpose, which is not willingly chosen, which defies logical explanations, and where innocents are victims. This topic cannot be fully explored in the short period of a sermon; and I am a frail vessel indeed from which to pour any wisdom. Yet the hurt around us demands that we ask the hard questions. Many books delve deeper; three I like are When Bad Things Happen to Good People by Rabbi Harold Kushner; The Wounded Healer by Father Henri Nouwen; and Good Grief by the Rev. Granger Westberg.

In times of suffering some people look to God. We are usually taught three things about our relationship with God:

1. God is all-powerful and causes everything that happens in the world. Nothing happens without God's willing it.
2. God is just and fair, and stands for people getting what they deserve, so that the good prosper and the wicked are punished.
3. I am, basically, a good person.

As long as we are healthy and well, we can believe all three of these statements without difficulty. When we suffer, only two of these statements can be true at the same time. If God is powerful and just, then suffering must be punishment for bad behavior or attitudes. If we are good but God causes us to suffer anyway, then God is not just. If we are good and we suffer and God is not responsible, then God must not be all-powerful.

Since most of us are taught that God is powerful and just, we are tempted, consciously or not, to blame the one experiencing suffering. It is easier to stop believing in human goodness than in divine perfection. Have you ever observed the suffering of another and felt both guilt and relief that it was them and not you? It is often too scary to say “It could just as easily have been I;” so we think instead “There must be a reason for their suffering.”

“Blaming the victim” helps us avoid the terror of the irrationality of suffering. People think, or say, things like *If the young woman had not been so provocatively dressed, the man would not have assaulted her.* “*If people worked harder, they would not be poor.*” “*If they had not been out late, they would not have had that accident.*” Doing this reassures us of our worthiness for our good fortune. Then, tragedy strikes us. We are no better or worse than before, but suffering comes and our well-ordered universe falls apart. And it seems God is not there.

Perhaps this is how Mary and Martha felt in today’s Gospel. They lived devout lives, even befriending the Nazarene prophet, Jesus. Surely the Lord would look on them with favor. Then suddenly, their brother Lazarus was sick. They sent word to Jesus but he inexplicably stays two days longer where he was. We know that he and his disciples knew it would be dangerous to return to Bethany, just outside Jerusalem, but we do not know if that or another reason is why he delayed. By the time Jesus and his disciples got there, Lazarus had been dead for four days. We cannot know their inflection but it does not take much imagination to hear it. Martha, the dogged housekeeper, somewhat reserved about spiritual things, expressing her stoicism: “*Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.*” And Mary, so enamored with Jesus that she listened rapturously to his teachings, now filled with anger at what must have seemed a betrayal: “*Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.*”

In the face of their pain, what Jesus does not do is as important as what he does do. He does not say “*It’s God’s will.*”

He does not say *“You or your brother must have done something to cause this.”* Jesus wept. He simply wept. He identified with the hurt and suffering of his friends.

Where is God when we suffer? As in this story of the death of Lazarus, God is with us, weeping, sustaining us, identifying with us in our hurt. God was present in Jesus; and God is present in us, for *others*, when they suffer; and in others, for *us*, when we suffer. I do not believe God wills our suffering. I do believe God permits us to live in freedom: a freedom that is a great joy but that can be the cause of some suffering. The Aurora, Colorado shootings of last week certainly attest to that.

So there is no complete answer that will make sense of all suffering. *“Why is there cancer?” “Why did my mother get cancer?” “Why did my friend Dave’s son die at age 12 from leukemia? “Why did my friend Ed’s daughter get killed by a truck at age 13?* We can offer learned explanations, but in the end the pain and anguish and sense of injustice will still be there.

Yet there is an “answer” in the sense that there is a “response.” First, we can remember that God loved us so much that he sent Jesus, who suffered, and in whom God identifies with us in our suffering. Second, we can remember that “Why?” is not always a question seeking an answer but a cry of pain seeking com-*passion*. “Compassion” means “to suffer with” and one of the themes I keep hearing here is that people do, indeed, have compassion with and for one another. Third, we can realize that sometimes there is not an answer to our suffering; that it is a mystery that will only finally be resolved at the end of our earthly life. Embracing these things helps us get the support we need and answer a different question, which is “How will I respond?”

Here are some “do’s” and “don’ts” to consider and, if helpful, to discuss with me or members of our pastoral care team:

DO

Call or write.

Say "I'm sorry."

Offer to share insights from your own recovery from loss.

Help the bereaved person identify a need and then offer to do it.

LISTEN, LISTEN, LISTEN!

Accept the feelings of the suffering person.

Pray.

DON'T

Avoid the suffering person.

Say "I know how you feel."
Every loss and person is unique.

Work out your past unresolved losses with the suffering one.

Say "Call if you need me" unless you are a really close friend. The suffering/grieving person is often embarrassed to ask for help.

Offer advice or explanations.

Judge feelings

Say "It's God's will."

I close with two stories. The first is what we can do. A father's child had died. In grief he wailed to his spiritual leader, "*What prayers and healing have you for my broken heart?*" Rather than try to reason with the father or send him away, the spiritual leader said "*Fetch me a mustard seed from a home that has never known sorrow. We will use it to drive sorrow out of your life.*" He came first to a splendid mansion and asked, "*I am looking for a home that has never known sorrow. Is this such a place? It is very important to me.*" They told him, "*You have certainly come to the wrong place*" and described all the tragic things that had befallen them. He said to himself, "*Who better to help these unfortunate people than I, who have had misfortune of my own?*" He stayed to comfort them and then resumed his search for a home that had never known sorrow. But wherever he turned he found a tale of sorrow. Ultimately, he became so involved in ministering to other's suffering that he forgot about the mustard seed, never realizing that the quest itself had driven out his sorrow.

The second story is what God does for us. It is about a woman who had a dream. In the dream the woman saw her life depicted in scenes along a beach. In the sands of the beach were two sets of footprints: hers, and those of the Lord. From time to time one set of footprints disappeared. The woman saw that those times corresponded to the times in her life of greatest despair.

In the privilege of the dream, the woman turned to the Lord and said, *“Lord, you promised me that when I decided to follow you, you would never leave me to walk alone. How is it now that, as I look across my life, I see that in times of despair you left me?”*

The Lord replied, *“My precious daughter, I have always loved you and love you still. You are right: I promised never to let you walk alone. So in those times of despair the footprints that you see in the sand are not yours, as you suppose; but they are mine. For I did not leave you to walk alone. But I was carrying you.”*

May the love of God be revealed to us in times of suffering: in the mystery of prayer; in the hands and feet of those who care; and in the power of a God strong enough to weep and weak enough that his power is made perfect in weakness, the sacrifice on the cross for our redemption. *I am the Resurrection and the Life; the one who believes in me, though they die, yet shall they live; and whosoever lives and believes in me shall never die.”* Amen.