

From the Pulpit

Salem First Presbyterian Church

Making Sense of Suffering

Job 2:11-13; John 9: 1-17

© copyright 2008 Audrey L. Schindler, Interim Pastor
First Presbyterian Church, Salem, Oregon
March 2, 2008

These days, it's not uncommon for grandparents to find they have a larger than expected role in bringing up grandchildren, giving a day or more a week to childcare. One says her two-year-old grand daughter is getting to the stage of asking "why?" about everything. "Why is the sky blue? Why do we have to drink milk? Why do we say grace? Why did the bird die?" By the end of the day, grandma is ready for a nap.

This morning our Scripture reading raises a question that stumps any of us, grandparents included; why does suffering happen? It's a question that comes to mind watching the evening news, with a suicide bombing in Iraq, or a doctor helping a child born with a cleft palate. And closer to home when tragedy strikes someone we love, we find ourselves crying out to God, why did it happen, why to them?

There are many attempts to make sense of suffering, some helpful, some hurtful, and in the end, perhaps none of them completely satisfying. Too often in our society, there is a blame-the-victim mentality that sees a causal link between sin and suffering. There was a football coach who was fired for making disparaging remarks about disabled people. He was into new age thought, and said he believed people were disabled because of bad karma, things they had done in a previous life.

While this isn't an enlightened view, it was much the same approach the disciples took when they encountered the blind man in our Scripture story. "Who sinned," they asked Jesus, "that this man was born blind?" "Was it him, or his parents?" If you think of it, it's a strange question. **If the man was born blind, how could it be his own sin that brought it on?** He would hardly have been old enough to have had much opportunity to sin.

Yet the views of that time held that some children were bad, even from the womb. The idea that it was his parents who sinned came from a passage in Jeremiah, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."¹ They thought the mistakes of one generation could be visited on those who came after.

But Jesus didn't buy into either theory. Nor did he give any of the alternative views you sometimes hear to make sense of suffering. There is what might be called the needlepoint theory, that sees life as a beautiful tapestry.² (I remember being part of the stitchery guild at one of the churches I served, where the women who made pew cushions would use the basket stitch to make the back of the tapestry as beautiful as the front. But those of us who were novices, had the back all knotted and tangled). The metaphor says that in life, we see only the back, and all seems chaotic, but one day, we will see the

¹ Jeremiah 31:29.

² As in the novel, *The Eighth Day*, by Thornton Wilder

New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967, in which he speaks of the tapestry of history in this way.

beautiful finished work of God, on the other side. And there is some comfort in this, that while we struggle with the question of suffering, we may understand it better by and by. This implies a starker truth, though, that **for now, the reality of suffering remains a mystery beyond our ability to fully explain** or comprehend.

Another alternative is to see suffering as something that builds character or refines our focus in life. After a house fire, you sometimes see people clutching a photograph of their family, thankful at least they got out alive. Sometimes suffering puts people through the refiner's fire, and they come out more sure of what really matters. While these are useful things that may *grow out* of a time of suffering, they don't give an answer for why it happens.

Much suffering can be explained not by blaming it on God, but by seeing it as a result of human selfishness or sin. When we wonder, "how can God let all the children go hungry in the developing world," there is a more disturbing question behind it, "**how can we in the developed world let them go hungry** when there is food enough to feed them all, if there were just the will to share it?" When we see gangs forming or crime in the community, we may wonder why this happens, but we are also challenged to ask why has our society allowed people to slip through the social safety net to where they feel life has no real options for them?

The answer of human sin can account for much suffering, like accidents caused by drunk drivers and the unintended consequences of human choices, but human sin can't explain a case like the man who was born blind.

A recent news story tells of the complexity and potential of the human brain and human DNA as factors in the disturbing genetic and neurological abnormalities that continue to plague humanity. These may be the price we pay for our neural complexity. The same potential that gives rise to art and music and conversation, also makes us prone to difficulty when things go wrong in the genetic code or the brain's hard-wiring. Again, this is not an answer to suffering, but it does give another insight on how it is that human development can go wrong.³

In the case of the man born blind, Jesus' disciples chalk it up to sin--he must have sinned. We see this kind of view in our day in a slightly subtler version when people blame the unemployed or the homeless for their plight, assuming that they've somehow brought it on themselves.

But Jesus had a different answer. Hearing his disciples ask, "who sinned," he said, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's work could be revealed in him."

Jesus made a crucial shift, from asking "why is there suffering," to asking "what can *God* do with suffering?"

In this case, Jesus was able to use the man's situation to give God glory. He healed the blind man, which showed his power to heal and save. In one sense, we can't generalize from the blind man's story. Sometimes healing happens, but other times sadly it does not. That was true even for Jesus when he prayed in Gethsemane that the cup of suffering might pass from him. Sometimes life gives us no choice but to drink the cup of pain.

³ "Inside the Autistic Mind," Time magazine, May 7, 2006.

In my home church, there is a stained glass window at the front of the chancel, with Christ on the cross, wearing a crown and a white robe. Around the cross, there is an small gothic inscription, so small that you have to go up into the chancel to read it. I remember reading it for the first time after a dear friend had died. I was surprised to find that it was a Bible verse from the book of Job, chosen by the family who had given the window. It says, **“Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.”**⁴ The window was given by a family whose life was marked by tragedy, and remains as a witness both to their suffering and to their unshakable faith. “Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.” It is a sentiment that echoes Christ’s cry on the cross. Although he cried out, “why hast thou forsaken me,” he still directed his plea, “my God, my God, why?”

Here we come up against the mystery of faith; while we may not find an answer to suffering, there is a bedrock assurance beneath every trouble and trial, that God himself in Christ has known what it is to suffer.

If we think of Jesus’ encounter with the blind man, it can give us guidance in how to face our own suffering. If we look to Jesus’ example, we can stop hitting our head against the wall of why. In time, we can **turn from asking why and begin to ask how**, how can we go on, and how can God bring about something good in it all?

If we look more closely at the story of the man born blind, we find Jesus uses his physical blindness as a metaphor for spiritual lack of vision. Jesus is revealed as the light of the world, the one who gives sight and a true vision of reality. The man born blind says, I don’t know who Jesus is, “all I know is I once was blind but now I see.” These words are echoed in our hymn this morning, Amazing Grace. You’ll recall the story of that hymn, how it was written by a former slave trader before the civil war who after years of transporting people from Africa suddenly was converted, and began to see those he had viewed as nothing more than cargo as real human beings. He stopped his trade and began to work for the abolition of slavery. He once was blind, but now could see.

That was the gift Jesus was offering the Pharisees, a gift of true vision. Like people of their day, they were quick to make the assumption that those who were suffering must have offended God. Jesus challenged them to see clearly, to realize that all people are our brothers and sisters, our neighbours in need. In that sense, we all **need the vision of God to counter our spiritual blindness to human need.**

As we move through this season of Lent leading up to Holy Week, it is a time to remember we have a God who is not far away from suffering, watching from a safe distance. We have a God who suffered for us, even to death on a cross.

Sometimes you will hear people say about a tragic loss, “it must have been God’s will.” Yet Christ’s death on the cross reminds us that far from being the one who *inflicts* suffering, **God is with us in suffering.**

The scriptures tell us God does not will that any should perish.⁵ This is the message that makes Good Friday good--that **Christ is with us as we bear the crosses life brings.**

⁴ Job 13:15.

⁵ II Peter 3:9.

Our other reading this morning deals with suffering in the book of Job. Like some families we know, Job's family had more than their share of tragedy. We can learn from Job's friends the need to be present when someone is in pain. At times, we feel at a loss when someone is mourning or has had a bad diagnosis. "What can I say to them," we wonder. Sometimes our fear of having nothing to say, our fear of our own mortality keeps us from reaching out to them. Job's friends did more good to him when they sat with him and kept quiet than when they tried to say something to explain his situation!

So part of what this Scripture has for us is that we are called to be tangible reminders to people that God is with them in their need. **We are to be the friends who will come, whether we know what to say or not**, who turn up on the doorstep with a hug or a casserole, content just to sit and listen.

This Scripture also calls us as a church to ask Christ to open our eyes, to give us a clear vision of the people around us in the neighborhood surrounding the church, some in need of food, or counselling, or housing.

As we move through these days of Lent, may we focus not so much on *why* suffering happens but rather on **how can we glorify God by responding to the pressing needs around us?** For Christ is waiting to take us out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, Give us a clear vision of your children in need around us. Help us to be a reminder to them that they are not forgotten by you. And help us as well, when we face suffering of our own, to know that you are with us always, you will never fail us nor forsake us. In the strong name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Copyright © 2008 Audrey L. Schindler, all rights reserved

Sermons are made available in print and on the web for readers only.

Any further publication or use of sermons must be with written permission of the author.

<p>The First Church Sermon Fund receives contributions to offset costs of printing, distributing, and mailing the Sunday sermons. Please mark any gifts for the "Sermon Fund." Additionally, sermons are available on the web at www.salemfirstpres.org, or can be e-mailed to you by contacting mainoffice@salemfirstpres.org</p>
--