

Sunday, July 31, 2016

Matthew 5:1-11

Hard Questions: Why do bad things happen to good people?

Marysville United Methodist Church

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There was a day a couple years ago that my emotions made quite the journey in the span of several hours. I worked on a message and thought about some of the awful things that happen in our lives and where God might be in the midst of them. Then I drove over to the hospital and got to lean over the crib wall of a 4 day old sleeping baby and whisper prayers of blessing, identity and health. I was overwhelmed with the new life quietly breathing in front of me. Grateful tears rolled down my cheeks. When I said amen, her dad mentioned he just saw an ambulance drive up with an infant going to NICU. There's nothing fair about one baby struggling to live in the same building as a baby who was just declared "healthy, perfect and ready to go home."

Why do bad things happen to good people?

Why are innocent people killed? Why do terrorists cause undeserving people deep worry and fear? How could our beloved Evalyn be sitting with us in worship several weeks ago and be gone by the end of the week?

If you've ever asked this question, you're in good company. Abraham asked God, "should the Judge of the whole world not act fairly?" Moses asked, "Why have You treated these people badly?" Jesus cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And today we still ask, "Why God?"

Why do bad things happen to good people? This question is near the top of the list for many atheists as to why God just doesn't make sense. Then when you are a Christian, and you believe in a good and loving God, the problem of suffering becomes even more pronounced. "If God is good and loving and all-powerful, why doesn't God put a stop to suffering?" (Hamilton).

We call this dilemma, theodicy. It's the problem of reconciling the goodness of God with the evil that happens in our world.

We don't have time this morning to review all the different perspectives on theodicy. If this is a question you've thought about a lot, consider checking out Adam Hamilton's, "Why? Making Sense of God's Will."

Adam makes a case for these truths:

1. God will not take away our free will, even when we use it to grieve God.
2. God will never abandon us, especially in the midst of our suffering.
3. While God is not the author of suffering, God will bring blessing out of tragedy.

Today, I want to share a reflection from a Jewish rabbi who says we may not really want to answer this question. I'll share a couple of God's promises to us in the midst of suffering and we'll close with a spiritual practice to consider this week.

Most people can rationalize away why bad things happen to people who've made bad choices. Natural consequences, we say. Someone has too much to drink and gets behind a wheel and crashes? We get that. Someone smokes most of their life and then gets lung cancer? Okay.

But what about tragedy that steps into the life of the innocent person? Some call it undeserved suffering. Everything from natural disasters to a house fire to miscarriage to cancer. Many struggle more with suffering that doesn't seem fair.

DO YOU REALLY WANT TO ANSWER THIS QUESTION?

Aron Moss, Jewish rabbi from Sydney, Australia, believes we don't really want to know the answer to this question. "What if someone came along and gave us a satisfying explanation and the mystery was finally solved? If this ultimate question were answered, then we could be able to make peace with the suffering of innocents. And that is unthinkable. Worse than innocent people suffering is **others watching their suffering unmoved**. We would no longer be bothered by their cry, we would no longer feel their pain, because we would understand **why** it is happening.

Imagine you're in a hospital and you hear a woman screaming with pain. Outside her room, her family is standing around chatting, all smiling and happy. You scream at them, "What's wrong with you? Can't you hear how much pain she is in?" They answer, "This is the delivery ward. She's having a baby. Of course we're happy."

When you have an explanation, pain doesn't seem so bad anymore. We can tolerate suffering when we know why it is happening.

I remember being in labor with my two kids and one of my mantra's was, "just let my body do it's job. The pain has a purpose." Because I knew the exact reason my body was in pain, I could tolerate it (well, somewhat!).

And so, if we could make sense of innocent people suffering, then we could live with it. But as long as the pain of innocent people remains a burning question, **we're bothered by its existence**. And that means we feel called to alleviate it. We want to get rid of it.

So we keep asking the question, but we stop looking for answers and start coming up with a response. We take our holy anger and turn it into a force for doing good. Much of the work of this faith community is because someone saw an injustice or a need and decided to work to make it better.

People needed comfort during an illness, so you made quilts. Kids didn't have the clothes they needed for school so you gave them clothes. People in Marysville couldn't all afford to eat lunch, so you serve them lunch on Mondays. Innocent people lost their homes to a wildfire, so you take time off work and go rebuild their homes. Parents needed a place to connect and have their kids play indoors so we started a playgroup. We wanted to help eradicate malaria in Africa, so our global church gave \$80 million dollars to help.

We are invited to redirect our frustration with injustice and unfairness and channel it into action.

We don't want an answer to the question. **We want an end to suffering**. And that is the work God has called us to as a church. It's why we're here.

GOD'S PROMISES

It's important in this series of asking hard questions that we also remind ourselves of God's promises to us:

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sits down with his disciples and the crowd and offers these surprising words: "**You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.**" Matthew 5:4

It would appear that tragedy is often when God gets our attention. We're most in touch with our pain and if we surrender and let go, God gets access to our hearts. Then everything can change.

God doesn't cause tragedy to happen. But God can bring blessing out of tragedy.

Paul tell us God's response to us in 2 Cor 12:9 is "my grace is sufficient, it's all you need. My power is strongest when you are weak."

When I've sat with someone who just lost their spouse or child, or just received frightening medical news, they naturally wonder where God is in the midst of this struggle. And I deeply believe that God is present and weeps **with** us. God is not a distant, unfeeling spirit with arms crossed and back to the world. God is here, crying, with us. And God's presence alone can heal. **We want the resolution, the problem to be gone, and God's answer is, "I'm with you. Do not fear." I don't think that's ever the answer we're looking for, but it usually ends up being exactly what we need.**

A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

So what can we do with our pain? How might we hold it and work with it? How do we turn the power of suffering toward new life?

Parker Palmer offers this thought and spiritual practice: Suffering breaks our hearts — but there are two quite different ways for the heart to break. There's the brittle heart that breaks apart into a thousand shards, a heart that takes us down as it explodes and is sometimes thrown like a grenade at the source of its pain.

Then there's the soft and flexible heart, the one that breaks open, not apart, growing into greater capacity for the many forms of love. Only the flexible heart can hold suffering in a way that opens to new life.

What can we do to make our tight hearts more flexible, the way a runner stretches to avoid injury? That's a question we ask every day. With regular exercise, our hearts are less likely to break apart into a million pieces, and more likely to break open into largeness.

There are many ways to make the heart more flexible, but all of them come down to this: Take it in, take it all in!

My heart is stretched every time I'm able to take in life's little deaths without an anesthetic: a friendship gone sour, a mean-spirited critique of my work, failure at a task that was important to me. I can also exercise my heart by taking in life's little joys: a small kindness from a stranger, the sound of a distant train reviving childhood memories, the infectious giggle of a two-year-old as I "hide" and then "leap out" from behind cupped hands. Taking all of it in — the good and the bad alike — is a form of exercise that **slowly transforms my clenched fist of a heart into an open hand.**

Eugene Cho says it this way: How do we engage so much suffering and injustice in the world? Begin with your heart. Invest your heart. Care, grieve, be angry, cry, hope, pray. Your minds and hands will follow. And in the process, we will become more like Christ.

So friends, may God be with us as we continue to question and wonder. May we resist apathy and indifference at the suffering in our world. May it beckon us to action, to bringing about the kingdom of God among us. We have holy work to do. Amen.