



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
Aurora Illinois

THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING:

May 26, 2013

How the Bible fails to answer our most important question

Romans 5.1-5

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Ecclesiastes 3.1-13

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven:

A time to be born and a time to die

A time to plant and a time to harvest

A time to laugh and a time to cry

A time to love and a time to hate

A time to work and a time to play

A time for war and a time for peace

A time for joy and a time for sorrow

God has made everything suitable for its time; moreover God has put a sense of past and future into our minds, yet we cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. There is nothing better than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in our lives.

Why do bad things happen to good people? For that matter, why do good things happen to bad people? Why is there suffering in this world? Where is an all-loving, all-powerful god who wants only the best for us when bad things happen to good people? Why doesn't God prevent good things from happening to bad people?

Such questions have been on the lips of humanity since the evolution of the human mind to comprehend our own mortality and differentiate between our own existence and that of other creatures around us. The inability of theology to answer such questions about suffering has been the reason many reject religion and a source of intense struggle for those of us who embrace it.

This conundrum is particularly keen for clergy folks. We are the "go to" people in a crisis, tragedy, loss or personal struggle, and usually at the center of the issue is the suffering that results. I have

spent my entire forty years in ministry trying to justify God's ways to the human race and I discovered long ago that it can't be done. Even so, when someone asks to talk about suffering—theirs or a loved one's—it isn't very satisfying to say "I don't know why." But it's all I have.

Religious practitioners have come up with several explanations for why people suffer such horrendous tragedies as the Holocaust or the Newtowns, the Boston Marathon bombings, the recent public murder in broad daylight in London or the massive tornadoes in Oklahoma.

There is, among a large number of religious folks these days, those who believe that everything has a purpose. Perhaps, but I'm not convinced. Explanations for suffering from this viewpoint propose that God has a larger purpose that may require suffering on our part to achieve it. But that isn't very helpful in assuaging our pain, and ultimately puts God on the level of human logic. It's unconscionable to me that someone would think that the horrific suffering some people must endure in any way factors into a divine plan, or that God uses human beings as pawns on a chessboard to accomplish some holy purpose. This viewpoint uses Jesus' death on the cross as an example of such holy, salvific suffering but ultimately does nothing to convince me of God's love. A father who would do such a thing to a son in today's world would be put in prison.

There are those also who tout the verse in Romans that suffering produced endurance and endurance character and character hope. But I'm not willing to go there, either, even if the Bible does say it. This letter from Paul is dealing with those who suffer because they have chosen to follow the teachings of Jesus in a culture that doesn't take kindly to their commitment, so of course they may suffer for it, Paul reminds them. That suffering may produce hope but I don't think it does much for the survivors in Oklahoma.

The crux of the problem lies in the theological belief that God is all-powerful and as such, could alleviate suffering altogether if he so chose. After much soul-searching, I began to question why I started with the premise that God is all-powerful, omnipotent and in control of everything, and finally realized that I'd been told it was fundamental to the faith, and I never questioned it. Aren't all gods seen as all-powerful? Isn't that the definition of a god? But what if God isn't all-powerful? Could God be God if not in control of the goings-on of the universe or have the power to change things if she so desired? If God could change things, and has the power to do so, but doesn't do it, how can we believe that God is love?

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that Christianity is the only world religion that confesses a God who suffers with us. It is not a popular idea, even among Christians, she says. We prefer a God who prevents suffering, but that is not the God we have. What the cross teaches us is that God's power is not the power to force human choices and end human pain. It is, instead, the power to pick up the shattered pieces and make something holy out of them—not from a distance but right close up.

(God in Pain, p. 118)

God's power may be a power that has nothing to do with control and everything to do with love. There is a power that is fundamental to life, a power that exists deep within the cycles and rhythms of life. It is the power that naturally causes the tulip and the rose to bloom every year after a frigid winter of ice and snow. It is the power of the human spirit to keep on going even after the most devastating tragedies. It is the power that keeps evil from having the final say. Any given evil, regardless of its devastation and longevity, ultimately succumbs to the power of good. Holocausts and Crusades do not last forever. This is the power of which Paul commends to the Romans, a

power of love poured into our hearts through the spirit. It is not a power that is in control; that intercedes to change the course of things; that prevents evil deeds; that prevents bad things happening to good people or facilitates good things happening to bad people. It is the power of resurrection that empowers us to life not the power that protects us from death or evil.

The biblical text is filled with images of power within cultures in which political and military power were the accepted ways of surviving. God is described as “Lord; Master; King; Father; Ruler; and Creator.” These are titles of power and control. But I think the image of God as “heart” is more appropriate in a contemporary understanding of God in the culture in which we live. The heart isn’t a controlling organ though it controls our whole being; it maintains the pulse and pressure of the blood that supplies every minute aspect of our body; it doesn’t quit working just because we don’t understand how it functions; it doesn’t give special privileges to some part of the body and withhold blood to other parts because of any power it wields. It simply, but powerfully, maintains a steady rhythm that courses throughout our body to keep it healthy and active. This is a good metaphor for the divine, it seems to me.

God left the world unfinished, still in the process of being created, the evolution of life ongoing, and the God who is at the center of the Big Bang and continues as the heart of the universe empowers us to keep the process going. We are given insights into science and medicine, psychology and hope to alleviate suffering where we can, knowing we’ll never eradicate it, believing that if God hasn’t eradicated it by now, that probably won’t happen either. We have made progress in using morphine and marijuana and other drugs to relieve pain; we’ve developed surgeries and radiations and chemotherapies to minimize the source of pain. We’ve discovered the way the mind and the body work so that through psychotherapy and physical therapy and preventative therapy and hospices, we can reduce the suffering, or at least help someone else walk through their suffering. Here is God’s power in our hands and minds and discoveries.

We haven’t found a way to stop hurricanes but we’re learning how better to prepare for them, thus relieving some suffering. We haven’t found a way to prevent people from using guns and bombs and drones and missiles for evil purposes but we reach out as best we can to those who are the victims of such atrocities.

So where do I ultimately come down on the problem of suffering? Not any place with a convenient answer for those who expect me to have one. Like Dr. Bart Ehrman, I do have a place of some resolution even if it isn’t an answer. It is found in the wisdom of the sage Ecclesiastes. Here we get a glimpse of the sustaining power of life that transcends our need for an answer.

These words ring true as the description of life without need to determine God’s involvement in preventing or allowing. There’s a time for this and a time for that; this is not better than that; life is a varied experience of this’s and that’s; accepting this when it comes and accepting that when it comes is one of the formulae for peace.

The people who live in the rhythm of life between its extremes are people whose lives we admire. They persevere through their tragedies as well as through their triumphs without bitterness when it’s bad or gloating when it’s good. They change the things they can and accept the things they can’t change and channel the sustaining power of God to have the wisdom to know the difference. They have learned that life just is. That suffering just is. That God is. That love is. These are words to

live by even when the Bible provides no answers to life's biggest "whys", the presence of evil and the problem of suffering.

To everything there is a time for every activity on the earth.

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven:

A time to be born and a time to die

A time to plant and a time to harvest

A time to laugh and a time to cry

A time to love and a time to hate

A time to work and a time to play

A time for war and a time for peace

A time for joy and a time for sorrow

God has made everything suitable for its time; moreover God has put a sense of past and future into our minds, yet we cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end. There is nothing better than to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in our lives.

May we learn to live well in the balance of life, enjoying what has been given to us as a gift, coping as best we can when things get out of sync; trusting God to sustain us in our times of suffering and in our times of ease. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

This sermon was developed during the reading of Dr. Bart D. Ehrman book *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer*. I'm grateful for his honest and forthright approach to the subject; the book was of immensely insightful in my own struggles with this subject.