

"The Question that Won't Go Away: Suffering"

Sandy Reimer

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READINGS AND SCRIPTURE

"There are many theological questions which can be asked for which the truest answer this side of the grave is: *I don't know*," Episcopal Bishop James A. Pike states. Who can understand the nature of evil or the reasons for the great suffering in the world or why humans are so prone to self-destruction? Reason comes up short trying to answer these piercing questions. "The eye goes blind," the poet Rumi warns, "when it only wants to see why." Jewish theologian Martin Buber asserts, "Real faith means holding ourselves open to the unconditional mystery which we encounter in every sphere of our life which cannot be compressed into any formula." ~ *Spiritual Literacy by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat*

And, even in our sleep, pain that will not forget falls drop by drop upon the heart. And in our despair, against our will, comes wisdom, by the awful grace of God. ~ *Aeschylus*

The God who said, "Out of the darkness the light shall shine!" is the same God who made this light shine in our own hearts. Yet we who have this spiritual treasure are like common clay pots, in order to show that the supreme power belongs to God, not to us. We are often troubled, but not crushed; sometimes in doubt, but never in despair; there are many enemies, but we are not without a friend; and though badly hurt at times, we are not destroyed. Even though our physical being is gradually decaying, yet our spiritual being is being renewed day after day. We fix our attention not on things that are seen but on things that are unseen. What can be seen lasts only for a time, but that which cannot be seen lasts forever. ~ *2nd Corinthians 4: 6 – 9; 16 and 18*

SPECIAL MUSIC – "Another Train" (Pete Morton) - Women's Ensemble – Salina Briseno Kiker, Tracy Bachmann, Jamie Baldwin, Judy Parsons, Angie Stewart.

*There's another train. There always is. Maybe the next one is yours.
Get up and climb aboard.*

SERMON - "The Question That Won't Go Away: Suffering" – Sandy Reimer

Why is there suffering? Every summer, during the "Ask the Pastor" service, someone writes this question on their slip of paper and hands it in for the ministers to address. When I see the question, I set it aside. It's not a question you can deal with in the two-minute time frame we are allotted on those Sundays. I'm not sure it's a question that anyone can deal with in a fifteen-minute sermon time frame. I'm not even sure it's a question anyone can answer period. But the question of why we suffer keeps coming up. This year it came up again when we asked for ideas for worship themes, and the question came with a recommendation to read Bart Ehrman's new book called God's Problem. More about that in a moment.

Let me begin with a disclaimer. As far back as there are written records, philosophers, theologians, ethicists, the most brilliant of minds in every civilization have

attempted to answer the question of suffering. While there have been many answers given, there has never been the definitive answer that satisfied everyone. I stand here very humbly today, approaching this subject with some fear and trembling. Yet, if our theme is Faith in Tough Times, then our faith also has to grapple with the issue of suffering. So what I share with you this morning is my own perspective as well as my encouragement to you to reflect on your perspective.

Now I have some hard news: when we ask the question of why there is suffering, the basic issue we have to address first is - what God do we believe in. Bart Ehrman, a popular Biblical scholar, wrote that book that was recommended to me, the full title of which is: "God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Address our Most Important Question – Why We Suffer." In his book, he reminds us that the Bible itself offers several conflicting answers to this question.

1) One of the Biblical answers is that we suffer because we have been bad and therefore God is angry and so we are being punished. That view is clearly set forth by the Old Testament prophets, who maintain that Israel's national sufferings came because the people had disobeyed God, and when the nation sinned, it paid the price in suffering. This is a view we find in many parts of the Hebrew scriptures and it is reinforced by some of the Christian scriptures that see suffering as God's direct punishment for sinful behavior.

2) A second Biblical view is that suffering is redemptive and that salvation can emerge from suffering. This notion then morphs into the belief that salvation in fact requires suffering. It is a quick jump from that understanding to the doctrine of atonement, that Jesus died to save us and his suffering redeems us from our sins. In the thread of Biblical stories about redemptive suffering, from the sacrifice of Isaac to Israel's slavery in Egypt to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, God is actively and explicitly involved in the suffering and uses that suffering to purify God's people.

3) A third Biblical perspective, in the poetic dialogues of the book of Job, is that there is no explanation for suffering. Even God, who appears at the end of those dialogues, refuses to give a reason for the suffering that Job endures. The book of Ecclesiastes offers a variation on this theme: God is not responsible for the pain and suffering in the world, neither does God reward the righteous with wealth and prosperity. So, why is there suffering? The author of Ecclesiastes doesn't know, so instead of focusing on the suffering of life, he recommends enjoyment, finding joy in the present and wonderful moments of living.

Bart Erhmann, the author of this book, is an interesting guy. He was a devout evangelical Christian who attended a fundamentalist Bible college, earned a Master of Divinity and a PhD in New Testament studies, became a professor of religious studies and an author of more than twenty books. When he wrote this book on God's Problem, however, he could no longer integrate the God he believed in – an external being who is all-knowing, all-powerful and actively, directly involved with this world, its events and its people – with what the Bible says about suffering. So, Erhmann, in his own words, lost his faith writing this book and became an agnostic.

Twenty-five hundred years ago in ancient Greece, the philosopher Epicurus expressed the same problem with these three questions:

- Is God willing to prevent suffering but unable to do so? Then God is impotent.
- Is God able to prevent suffering but unwilling to do so? Then God is arbitrary at best or mean and malicious at worst.
- Is God both able and willing to prevent suffering? If so, then why is there suffering?

So the real crux of this question about suffering is how we see God. At UCG, we accept that each of us knows God in our own way. I suspect, however, that many of us in this church do not believe in a god who is a large human-like being somewhere up in the heavens who is all powerful. I suspect that many of us in this church do not believe in a god who, like Santa Claus, has a list that he keeps for each one of us, checking off each day what we did that was good and what we did that was bad, and then punishing us for the times we are bad. I suspect that many of us in this church do not believe in a god who sends hurricanes and tornados to devastate particular people and towns while sparing others or a god who manipulates one car crash to save a child's life while allowing another crash to kill three other children.

All that said, then what God do you believe in? What God do I believe in? For when suffering comes to us personally and to those we love – in the form of illness, a natural disaster, a plane crash, a devastating loss – it is so easy to fall back on our more primitive religious experiences and images. I think our real underlying question about suffering is this: “When I am in pain, in crisis, in danger, why doesn't the God I don't believe in do something to keep me safe, healthy, happy and alive?”

Let me tell you about the time I was flying in a Lockheed L1011 airplane from Newark, New Jersey to Bermuda and the seam of the plane over the exit door split open. The cabin began to depressurize, the oxygen masks did not drop, and the plane took a rapid dive 30,000 feet down to where we were skimming over the ocean and the air was breathable. What was my definition of God during that terrifying nosedive? I was praying that God would hold that plane up in the air! Is that logical? No. Reasonable? No. Is that the God I truly believe in? No! But it's surely a human response, the reflex that often happens to us in times of crisis and pain, in times when we are touched by suffering.

Let's look at the issue of suffering in some other ways. Perhaps suffering is simply a part of life. Scott Peck begins his best-selling book, The Road Less Travelled, by saying that life is not fair. The Buddha said, “Life is suffering. Birth is suffering; aging is suffering; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering.” In contrast to the prosperity faith messages of many Christian evangelicals, Jesus emerged from his own wilderness trials and temptations to minister to an occupied people in pain. He spoke of the suffering that is part of life and he responded with tenderness and compassion to those who suffered, and Jesus called on all of us to respond that way as well.

I think that there are several kinds of suffering:

- there is the suffering that we inflict on ourselves, by our own thoughts and our actions and by the consequences of those actions;
- there is the suffering that we experience because we and our loved ones are mortal and therefore vulnerable to illness, to death, to loss;
- there is the suffering that is the result of natural disasters;
- there is the suffering that others inflict upon us, both unintentionally and sometimes intentionally;
- there is the suffering that is global: inflicted by nations and institutions, by tribal, ethnic and religious allegiances, by what Walter Wink calls the domination systems of power and repression;
- there is the suffering that has no explanation.

Suffering is part of life. And when you ask me why is there suffering, I want to ask, why is there joy? And I want to ask why it is so easy for us to hold God responsible for the pain and tragedy of this world while we conveniently take God for granted in times of beauty, love and blessing.

My adult faith journey has taken me beyond the God of theism, the God who is an external being, something like a human without a body, who is able to do anything, knows everything, and can, if God chooses, control the actions of individuals, of disease, of nature and of nations. Unlike Ehrman, I no longer ask who God is, but instead what God is. For me, God is the life force, the power of creation and love, the infinite mystical presence that is the inescapable depth and center of all that is. God is the Ground of Being itself.

My sense of God is close to the theology known as panentheism. Not theism - the external God above all things. Not pantheism – the God in and defined by all things. But panentheism – the God present and among everything but not fully limited or fully defined by the things of this world. I experience God in that part of me I call my soul, the place where I touch that power of creation, that mystical presence that is both within me and also more than just me. I experience God in the midst of life, in the midst of creation, in the depths of the present moment. And there is joy and there is pain, there is pleasure and there is sorrow, there is beauty and there is suffering. God doesn't send us one or the other to reward us or to punish us or to test us. God does not send suffering, but God is never absent from me in the midst of my suffering.

I think this other view of God and suffering is expressed in the Bible, certainly in the two scripture passages we read earlier today. The words of the 23rd Psalm are so familiar that we almost don't even hear them, but they address what God is and where God is in our joy and in our suffering. God is with me in the still waters, in the beautiful moments that restore my soul. God is with me when I walk through the shadows and the hard times, through the deepest darkness, even the valley of death. God is with me in the suffering, with me and beyond me; God is that the center that does not abandon me. "I am troubled, but not crushed," says Paul in II Corinthians; "I am in doubt, but not despair; while there are those who are against me, I am never without a friend; and though badly hurt at times, I am not destroyed," because even though my

physical being is mortal, my soul is renewed day by day when I am centered in God, when I walk the path that unwinds in God's name.

And that leads me to the church. I believe that the church is the community that mediates suffering, because none of us can hold suffering alone. One of the most crucial functions of our spiritual community is to be a container of grace where grief can be expressed, where suffering can voice its anguish, where we can hold one another in a non-anxious and present care so that healing and mending can happen. I see that so clearly at memorial services here, when we gather together to surround the grieving family with our presence, to create a visible tangible container for that grief. It is why it is so important for us to be here for one another. And through that gathered community, the Spirit of God is palpably present within us and through us as well.

Rita Nakashima Brock says in her book, Saving Paradise, that "Faith is not freedom from suffering or conflict, but instead the belief in the presence of God within and among us and the belief in the possibilities of love. What does God do in the presence of suffering?" Brock writes, "God calls us to embrace both life's aching tragedies and its persistent beauty, to labor for justice and for peace, to honor one another and to live our lives attentively and intentionally on the soil of this good and difficult earth." And to that I say, "Amen."

There is a PS – Faith is not certainty; instead, faith is believing in that which is unseen. Our knowledge will always be incomplete; our faith will continue to grow and change; there must always be space for mystery, for angels and for what seems miraculous; and some questions will never be fully answered. So when we don't have absolute answers and when things have fallen apart, it is also important to remember that there is always a bigger picture than the one we can see right in front of us now.

REPRISE – "Another Train"

PRAYER

O God, for whom we have many names, like Dayspring from on High, names that reflect your light of Creation shining within us and around us, we pray for your love to surround us. We lift up our gratitude for the beauty of this world, for the clear blue skies and sunshine of this day, for the sheer blessing of being alive, for the joys that enrich our lives, for all the wonderful moments that we savor.

O God, for whom we have many names, like Rock of Ages, names that reflect the times when the very landscape of our life changes and we need to find your light in the midst of darkness, we pray for your love to surround us. In those times of pain and struggle, may we turn to that center within us that is You. Deeper than the hurt and suffering, may we sense your strength in the beating of our hearts, your grace in the cleansing wash of our tears, and your spirit in the rhythm of our breath.

O God, for whom we have many names, like Shepherd and Friend, be with us as we walk through the shadows, we pray for the healing of our wounds. Sustain us with the grace of friends and companions whose compassion and understanding are the rod and staff that allow us to carry on.

O God, for whom we have many names, names like Redeemer and New Life, we pray for the wisdom to see, when we are ready, that other train and to step aboard into your power of second chances and rebirth.

Dayspring, Rock of Ages, Shepherd, Redeemer, Ground of all Being you are more than any words, more than any name, with us and within us and beyond us, in joy and in sorrow, now and always. Amen.

***BENEDICTION** - *From Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*

On the day when the weight deadens your shoulders and you stumble,
may the clay dance to balance you.

And when your eyes freeze behind the gray window and the ghost of loss
gets into you, may a flock of colors – indigo, red, green, and azure blue –
come to awaken you in a meadow of delight.

When the canvas frays in the ship of your thought and a stain of ocean
blackens beneath you, may there come across the waters a path of yellow
moonlight to bring you safely home.

May the nourishment of the earth be yours,

May the clarity of God's light be yours,

May the protection of the ancestors be yours,

and so may a slow wind work these words of love around you,
an invisible cloak to mind your life.

Resources - Going deeper:

- God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question – Why We Suffer, by Bart Ehrman, Harper One, 2008.
- Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire, by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, Beacon Press, 2008.
- The Book of Creation: An Introduction to Celtic Spirituality, by J. Philip Newell, Paulist Press, 1999.
- Why Christianity Must Change or Die, John Shelby Spong, Harper San Francisco, 1998.