

“Faith and Suffering”

Psalm 79:1-9

Romans 8, selected verses

February 15, 2009

The Rev. Christine Chakoian

First Presbyterian Church

Lake Forest, Illinois

“How long, O Lord?” On Monday last week my friend and mentor Jon Walton was wheeled into the operating room. He is a beloved member of our Moveable Feast study group – he was my mentor when I interned more than 25 years ago. It was his third open heart surgery in thirty years to correct yet again a congenital defect. The valves last only so long, and it was time for a replacement. The surgery is delicate and you never, ever know whether the patient will make it. On Tuesday I visited a man we have been praying for whose mind is sharp as a tack but whose body is confined to a bed because of MS and diabetes. It’s only a matter of time before his second amputation – not to relieve his exquisite pain; it’s only after the foot atrophies that it becomes “medically necessary.” On Wednesday I got updates on three different women in our congregation who were recently diagnosed with cancer; each one is pursuing an aggressive treatment whose outcome is uncertain. On Thursday I was in Louisville, Kentucky for a meeting with other Armenian-Presbyterian leaders. I heard from pastors in Southern California who are inundated with thousands of émigrés from Soviet Armenia; the unemployment rate, dereliction rate, depression rate and crime rates are astronomical. Most of them don’t know where to begin. On Friday while I was at the airport I heard the news about a small passenger jet that nose-dived into a house outside of Buffalo, New York. Scores of people were killed instantly.

I’d like to say that wasn’t a typical week but I’d be lying. And I’m hardly alone. Every single one of us here has stories of suffering. Maybe it’s your neighbor. Maybe it’s your loved one. Maybe it’s you yourself. Suffering is a fact of life, a reality that goes with living and moving and breathing. For a person of faith, the questions raised by suffering are inevitable: Why? Why does it have to be this way? Is it a design flaw or is it somehow God’s will that the innocent suffer? If God exists, where is God in the midst of human suffering? Or, in the words of the Psalmist, How long, O Lord? How long?

These complex questions have yielded different answers over the years. In a helpful website called “Beliefnet” frequent contributor Ellen Leventry notes: “For centuries people have been asking, ‘Why, God, why?’ ... And for centuries, religion has been trying to answer the question of how a loving or just God could allow humans to endure such suffering.” Through the ages, different peoples have arrived at different conclusions:

“According to ...Buddhism all of life is suffering and suffering is caused by attachments to worldly things. This attachment, which can take the form of greed, hatred, and ignorance ... can, unless mitigated, return as more suffering (karma).

“... Many Hindus view suffering as punishment for misdeeds committed .... Even a seemingly innocent person who has not eradicated bad karma from past lives through charitable deeds is susceptible to such payback.  
...

“Many Muslims understand that to include suffering--enduring pain or loss is a way of submitting to the will of Allah. ... [They] believe suffering and adversity strengthen one's faith, as pain often leads to repentance and prayer and good deeds.

“[According to] Judaism, God gave humans free will to feel pleasure and pain, and His purpose in allowing deep suffering of the innocent must be good even if mysterious. God suffers along with the sufferer. .... Jews place high importance on working to help those in need; the concept of *tikkun olam*, or repairing the world, will help allay undeserved suffering.”  
([www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/2005/01/Why-Bad-Things-Happen.aspx](http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/2005/01/Why-Bad-Things-Happen.aspx))

And what of us? We who call ourselves Christians – who have been baptized into Christ – what sense do we make of senseless suffering?

The two most frequent explanations of suffering I hear today go like this. First, many Christians attribute suffering to “God’s will.” Since God is sovereign, he must have a “plan” for our lives, and suffering is part of the plan. We didn’t earn it; we didn’t deserve it; but God must have a reason for it. This, by the way, is a strict Calvinist approach. The other approach I hear most frequently is that suffering is God’s punishment for sin. Two days after the September 11 attacks the Reverends Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell said, and I quote, “the pagans ... abortionists ... feminists ... gays and lesbians ... the ACLU ... I point the finger in their face and say ‘you helped make this happen.’” Falwell later apologized for his remarks. But he did not denounce the belief that suffering is God’s judgment for sin.  
[\(http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/14/Falwell.apology/\)](http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/14/Falwell.apology/)

But there are problems with both of these approaches. The first – that God is in control of everything and even “plans” our suffering – has its merits: God is sovereign, and our very breath is God’s gift and not of our own making. But it makes God look capricious and cruel. Moreover, there’s a huge difference between predestination and determinism. I know, I know, I’m trafficking in textbook language now, but bear with me. Predestination says “God chose me and loved me before I knew God.” Determinism says “God chose every decision I ever made and planned out my whole life.” We are not puppets on a string. We are children of God with freedom of our own, wills of our own, hearts of our own, minds of our own. I don’t believe that God micromanages our days.

The opposite end is just as problematic. In this approach, suffering is God’s judgment of sin. This too has merits: sin does have consequences. Sometimes we suffer directly as a result of our own behavior: the addict who refuses treatment, the adulterer who continues to philander. But it would be a capricious God who made us suffer for someone else’s sin. Is God punishing Bernie Madoff’s victims for Madoff’s sins? Is God punishing the victims of the global financial collapse for the deceit, indifference, neglect, or even ignorance of those in charge? To say that sin has consequences is one thing; to say that sin is God’s punishment is quite another.

So what sense do we make of senseless suffering? Why does God allow suffering to happen? As for me, I've come to believe that God, although in ultimate control, offers us great freedom. We are made in God's image, the book of Genesis reminds us; we are but just a little lower than the angels, the Psalmist reports. So we are neither puppets on a string nor children to be punished. Moreover, God allows rain to fall on the just and the unjust, Jesus assures us. God allows good things to happen to the undeserving, just as God lets bad things happen to good people. Suffering happens in every life – part mystery, part nature, part human consequence.

So over time, “why” has ceased to be such a crucial question for me. I've come to peace with the fact of suffering – the inevitable failure of human power to ward off evil; the inscrutable winds of weather and illness; the inexpressible poignancy of pain that could have been prevented. I keep wondering how we can come to our senses and stall the avoidable tragedies of life – we can and must do so much more about hunger and disease, about climate change and man-made disasters. But I've stopped asking “why.” Instead, more and more I've wondered instead *what happens next*. What are we to *do* with suffering, *learn* from suffering, even, perhaps, *gain* through suffering? What are the blessings, even – unwelcome blessings, perhaps, but blessings nevertheless -- that can come through suffering?

First, our relationship with God can be strengthened in our suffering. Don't get me wrong – I don't think God causes us suffering to draw us closer – but we can grow closer to God *because* of our suffering. How many times have I railed at God – with the Psalmist I scream at the Almighty, “How long, O Lord?” or “How could you let this happen?” or even “What good are you anyway? Why do I bother believing in you?” And I know through the Scripture that God, in his kindness, welcomes any prayer, and holds us fast even while we kick and scream and the heart in its tempest rages. And when suffering has brought us to our knees and we are utterly without words, the Scripture tells us, “the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.”

Second, suffering can draw us closer to others in ways we do not seek out when we are strong. I've come to believe that there is a sort of "underground" which the suffering live in – a parallel universe that goes on when the rest of the world goes about its business. Once you've experienced it, you cannot pretend it's not there. When we are in times of strength and peace in our lives, we remember those who walk below -- in grief, in illness, in isolation, in fear – and we reach out in compassion to them. It is a sacred privilege to travel back and forth between these levels: to walk with people in their darkness, to remind them of the places of light, and to lift them back to this world of peace when their suffering is over. We are drawn together in the intimacy of suffering in ways we could not be if we were always strong.

Finally, suffering can strengthen our true selves. If life were effortless, we would never find in ourselves the nobility of courage, the humility of weakness, the resilience of faith, or the peace of acceptance that God has planted in the human breast. We discover our best selves not in times of ease and plenty, but in our seasons of difficulty and trial. It is not just that we are tested; it is that, in our testing, we are seasoned and strengthened, like metals made stronger for going through the fire.

Why does God suffer? I do not know. Until I meet God face to face, I will never know. But what I do know is this: God can use suffering to bring new blessings that we could neither ask nor imagine. Or, as St. Augustine long ago once said, "God would not allow any evil to exist unless out of it he could draw a greater good. This is part of the wisdom and goodness of God." (Beliefnet.)

As for my friend Jon Walton, he has come through his surgery well, and the Moveable Feast has grown closer than we've ever been as we've held him in prayer. The man we've been praying for who will need an amputation testified to the strength he's found in the arms of God and the ministries of the faith of a member of our church who visits him. The women in our congregation with cancer have all shared their astonishment at the power of

prayer and unexpected blessings in their trials. As for my Armenian cohort or the victims of last Friday's crash or any other tragedy, I cannot say.

But I can say this: God is in the business of resurrection – of new life – of transformation. Or, as the apostle Paul once said, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Amen.