

Sermon for Sunday, October 7, 2018

REALITY CHECK

He was a member of my church and he was dying. The malignant tumor in his head was inoperable, and there was little hope that the chemotherapy, which was being administered directly through a port in his brain, would be successful. When I saw him and spoke with him, he was angry, bitter, and resentful. "Life," he said repeatedly, "is just a kick in the head."

It was hard not to agree with him and impossible not to sympathize with him. He was a good man. He had lived with integrity and moral discipline. In his professional life as an attorney he had contributed mightily to the cause of justice and compassion. As a man of faith, he had served his Lord with heart-felt dedication. He had been an elder in the church three times, taught the confirmation class for eighteen years, and his pledge had always been generous. He was a good man. But now, just months after his long-awaited retirement, when life was supposed to take on a whole new sense of freedom and joy, he was dying. He felt betrayed by God. Everything he had done was fruitless, every sacrifice, pointless, everything he had believed in, meaningless. The only conclusion he could arrive at, or wrest from his tragic circumstances, was that "Life is just a kick in the head."

Paul Cezanne, the great painter, during his difficult, for long unsuccessful, and very lonely life, used to utter a similar lament. "Life is terrible," he said. That indictment of life did not refer to the burdens he had to bear: the lack of understanding of his work by his contemporaries; the failure of his marriage; and the contempt of his family, who had no appreciation of art. Rather, this indictment referred primarily to the meaninglessness that comes sweeping in like a chilling draft from the background of life.¹ Why is goodness not rewarded? Why do the manipulators and truth-slayers get the long end of the stick, while the kind, unselfish, honest people who champion the best values rank among the also-rans? Why do the innocent suffer and the guilty skate free? Why do bad things seem to happen to some families more than others? How can God stand by while whole peoples are systematically executed, or drowned in a tsunami? Is there no rhyme or reason to the distribution of suffering and gifts? Is there no measurable justice in God's kingdom? Does God care at all, about any of us, really?

There is a story about Paul Tillich, the great 20th century existential theologian, whose thought and writing and speaking could be difficult to grasp. He said, for instance, that "God does not exist—God is the essence of existence." And he said, "God is not a being—God is the Ground of all being." And he said, "Faith," is best understood as "ultimate concern." After a particularly strenuous lecture a man stood up to ask a question. He said, "Professor Tillich, I appreciated your remarks and I think I understand that faith is ultimate concern. That's very interesting. But what I really want to know is do you think the Ultimate is concerned about me?"² That's the question isn't it, the real question that life asks of faith? Does God care? And does faith in God make any appreciable difference in the end?

The Bible itself wrestles with the issue of suffering and God's relationship to it, and nowhere does it do so more vigorously and honestly than in the book of Job. Job loses everything he has and comes to God perplexed, confused, wounded and angry. He is a good man, a faithful, honest and just man. Why has this happened? Three friends try to console him and express the conventional theological wisdom of the day. He must have done something wrong; there is some behavioral or character flaw in him which accounts for all this tragedy. But Job knows he is innocent, that his suffering is undeserved, and he confronts God head on—"I'm innocent," he cries. "Why is this happening to me?"

The conclusion of the book is magnificent. God finally responds "out of the whirlwind," by asking Job where he was when God was creating the world? "Who is this who is asking these questions?" God asks. And Job, finally acknowledging that there is mystery here he does not comprehend, and that no simple, viable answer will be forthcoming, says, "I had heard about God, but now—in this mystery of not knowing—I see God." It's a remarkable, albeit enigmatic, conclusion. And yet, it is faith's answer. Trust in God, the *Mysterium Tremendum*, and endure in hope.

The book of Job is a reality check for the faithful. It was written within the context of the Exile, Israel's greatest national tragedy, to debunk the conventional theological wisdom with which the faithful had been deluding themselves, and which was destroying their faith like a malignancy. It's the same conventional theological wisdom with which we delude ourselves today: that sin causes suffering; that somehow we, or whomever is suffering, must deserve it, must have done something to bring it on; or that suffering is sent by God to test us or refine us. That same

¹ Helmut Thielicke, I Believe, The Christian's Creed, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968)16.

² John M. Buchanan, from a sermon, "Does God Care?", September 26, 1999.

wisdom deludes us into thinking that good things should happen to good people, that faithfulness is deserving of reward, and that somehow, someday, in the great by-and-by, the believers will enjoy heavenly bliss while the reprobates will get their comeuppance. But suffering, undeserved, painful, and senseless, is always a reality check. It makes us take a hard look at who we really are, and who God is, without illusion or delusion. Suffering is faith's test (and ironically, faith's opportunity).

The problem we have in blithely abandoning faith's conventional wisdom is that there is some degree of truth to it. Sin does, to some degree at least, result in suffering. We know there is a cause and effect relationship between some behavior and bad things happening. And we know there are logical negative consequences to some behaviors, like smoking, gluttony, and sloth. But while some sin results in suffering, not all suffering is attributable to sin.

Some suffering does test and refine our faith, making us stronger and better. I don't think that is the purpose behind it, or that God afflicts us with it for our edification, but sometimes that is what happens, and it can be a good thing. The person who has journeyed through the valley of the shadow of death, and emerged from it alive, has a new and compassionate perspective on life. They have a new appreciation for what is important, and what isn't. And those who have suffered, say from oppression, and have emerged from it into freedom, are not only freedom's greatest advocates, but also the most effective advocates of the oppressed. We can learn from suffering, and grow from it. We almost always do.

But God does not send suffering, nor is suffering God's will. What God wills, above all else, is freedom—the freedom of the created order, and the freedom of God's children, the freedom to choose for God or against God in any given moment. God's end is love, and for love to be genuine, it must be free. So we are free, and in a free order, good things and bad things happen. There are beautiful sunsets, and terrifying storms, Olympic athletes and people with disabilities, cells that protect us and cells that malfunction, inspirational artists and diabolical tyrants. The Creator is not directing every action, but like a loving parent, is allowing for the freedom of choice. As Job so insightfully replies, "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?" To love is to accept the risks of freedom.

But when the conventional wisdom fails us, and the tragic dimension of life overwhelms us. When "life is terrible," or "just a kick in the head," there is at the end of it all one faith claim, based in reality, we can choose to make: that God cares desperately and passionately about us. That is what it means to profess faith in Jesus Christ as the incarnation of God, that God so loved us, that God came among us in Jesus Christ, identified with us, and suffered through death for us, that we might trust ultimately in God's love for us. The one who loves the most, suffers the most. And the one who suffers the most, loves the most.

Author, Reynolds Price, when he was enduring his own bout with the emotional suffering and physical pain of cancer, had a dream that he was up to his knees in the Sea of Galilee and Jesus was washing his cancerous legs. And he shares the story of an 87-year-old woman who had a similar dream. She was facing exhaustion and painful tests before surgery. She was afraid and dreaded everything about the pending experience:

"I went out along the Galilee hills and came to a crowd gathered around a man, and I stood on the outskirts intending to listen. But he looked over the crowd at me and said, 'What do you want?' I said, 'Could you send someone to come with me and help me stand up after these tests, because I can't manage alone?' He thought for a moment and then said, 'How would it be if I came?'" (*A Letter to a Man in Fire: Does God Exist and Does He Care?* p.30-31)

That's the good news. In Jesus Christ God has come. God comes to be with us in ways we do not always see or understand. But God comes, and God cares.

Like Job we are wise, I think, to persist, in our integrity. But our integrity is not our goodness, our honesty, or our moral code. Rather, our integrity is simply this: that we are God's children, creatures of a loving God, who will not let us go, who is faithful to us even when we are not faithful. To believe that, and trust it, is to live in the light and peace of God's kingdom, which thankfully, is the real world.

PRAAYER: Almighty God, remind us in all places and in every circumstance that you care desperately about us, and have come to us in Jesus Christ, that we may endure suffering in hope of your kingdom that is coming. In Christ we pray. Amen.

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Job 1:1; 2:1-10