

Sermon Thoughts – Not the Sermon
January 21, 2007

Two Sermons On ...

God: 2. The Power of Love – Evil and God's Goodness

John 9:1-7

1 John 4:7-12; 16b-21

Sermon in a Nut Shell

Love does not coerce or CAUSE a response – it desires, lures, and attracts a response, but it does not compel. I therefore do not believe that God CAUSES anything. Everything that happens, happens out of the potentials of the present and restraints of the past. The lure of God's love is one of the potentials that is always present in every moment, but it is not the only one. And it may not be the one that is accepted to guide the choices made.

The Power of Love – Evil and God's Goodness

Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?

This question that opens the passage we read this morning from the Gospel according to John raises a question we still ask today:

Why do bad things happen to good people?

Or, to put the question more specifically in the context of our faith:

Why does a good God cause – or allow – bad things to happen to good people?

Today, we live in a scientific and medical age. If a baby were born blind today, we would go to a doctor or scientist, not a priest, for an explanation and expect to receive an answer about genetics or foetal development or hormones or ... anything except sin.

And so as we ask **our** questions about why do bad things happen to good people, we have to be careful to understand how this question was answered in Biblical times. In Biblical times – and in all ancient cultures – it was understood that something happened only if someone caused it. There was no concept of “the laws of nature,” of gravity and such. What could clearly be seen was that if you came across a road or a well, it was there because someone had put it there. And so in the same way, things that happened that were not caused by humans, had to be put there by invisible beings – gods or other spirits. Where did the rain come from – an invisible rain god. Where did the crops come from – an invisible plant god. Why was there no rain, no crops – the gods were unhappy, and humans needed to offer sacrifices or perform other actions that would make the gods happy again.

Although the faith of the Jews was that there was only one God, not many, they still understood that every thing that happened was caused by God. But. Since their faith also led them to understand that God was good, and that God was trustworthy and unchangeably

desiring peace, justice and the well-being of all; why then did our good God cause bad things to happen to good people. The answer – which we heard in the reading from John this morning – was that bad things happened because of human sinfulness.

Now I agree that bad things **DO** happen because of human sinfulness – not because God punishes us for being bad. But simply because God's ways are the ways that lead to life, and not following those ways will inevitably lead to suffering – and because of human greed, exploitation and abuse – the suffering is all too often experienced by the most vulnerable and innocent.

But the case of a baby born blind presses the question to a deeper level. How could a baby have sinned? How could a baby have done anything that would cause God to make it be born blind? The answer – which the disciples suggest – is that because of the parent's sin God caused their child to be born blind. I don't know about you, but I don't find that a very satisfactory answer. Why should an innocent baby suffer because of something its parent's did? That doesn't seem fair.

Unfortunately, no answers to this question “feel good” to me. And, to be frank, I'm not sure that there could be any “feel good” answer in the face of the reality of the evil and suffering that there is in our world.

Even in the short time that I have been here, I am aware of situations that all of you are living with that raise the question of where is God in the face of this suffering? In my own life, my father was killed in an accident when he was 40, and my sister died of cancer when she was 23. Where was God? Why did our good God cause or allow those bad things to happen?

My response to those questions is not very strong, but it is rooted in the conviction that a core, unshakable, unchangeable truth about God is that God is love. God is what love is. And God always and only does what love does. God has all the power that love has – no more, no less.

Now love is powerful. Many of us have changed the course of lives because of love. Made life decisions because of love: love for a spouse, love for a child, love for a parent, love for a stranger, love for the planet. Love is powerful; but it is not **ALL** powerful.

For example, how many of you who are parents have been able to always and only relate to your children through the power of love? How many of you have at least sometimes resorted to bribes? Or threats? Or consequences? Have “lost it,” and resorted to anger or force? Love is not **ALL** powerful because it relies on a response from the ones being loved. And sometimes the ones being loved will ignore the power of love, and simply go their own way. Love does not coerce or **CAUSE** a response – it desires, lures, and attracts a response, but it does not compel. I therefore do not believe that God **CAUSES** anything. **Everything that happens, happens out of the potentials of the present and restraints of the past. The lure of God's love is one of the potentials that is always present in every moment, but it is not the only one. And it may not be the one that is accepted to guide the choices made.**

I believe that our universe is what it is today through an interaction of the “laws of nature” and the influence of God’s divine lure. The “laws of nature” provide for both remarkable continuity and stability, and for evolution and novelty. We now know that the universe is not a machine; is not 100% knowable and predictable; is not 100% determined. Amidst all that can be known and predicted, there is also much that is uncertain, unknowable, random, and completely unprecedented. In other words, there is true freedom and true choice. And it is precisely at the point of freedom and choice that the power of God’s love is at work. Seeking at each and every moment to lure the choice towards God’s desire for justice, peace, beauty and intimacy. God’s love is powerful, but it is not all powerful in shaping the choices that are made.

The same force of gravity that keeps the planets in place, also meant that at a certain point the collision that killed my father was unavoidable. The same process of random mutations that results in the amazing evolution of diversity, beauty and resilience of life was also at work in my sister’s cancer.

Do I want the planets to stay in their course? Do I want the amazing evolution of life to continue? It seems then that I must also accept the unavoidable reality of accidents and disease. But where then is our good God? Where then is “the power of love?”

This is a question I fully intend to demand an answer to when it is my turn to meet God face to face. In the meantime, I can only offer my own response, that God is indeed always present. That God did indeed seek to influence and change the choices that led to my father’s accident; and to influence and change the results of the treatments of my sister’s cancer. But in both cases, I do **NOT** believe God “caused” these things to happen; nor “allowed” them (meaning God actually could have prevented them from happening but chose not to). God was present with the power that love has – no more, no less. And in these cases, other forces and choices prevailed. But it was **NOT** God who **CAUSED** or **ALLOWED** these deaths.

But I also believe that ultimately it is the power of God’s love that prevails.

My vision of paradise, of the life to come, is that, freed of our flesh-bound limitations, our stupidities and faults; and freed also from the physical “laws of nature,” we finally are in a place where “other forces and choices” no longer prevail. Where the power of God’s love is all there is. And where tears are dried, all injuries and disease are healed, all wrongs and scars are erased, and all relationships are restored to the way God intended and desired them to be. I wish I didn’t have to wait till then. And I guess that is why Jesus teaches to pray here and now ...

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven ...
Amen to that. May the power of God’s love direct our lives and guide all our choices.