

WB Friends Meeting
5-31-20, 10:20 AM
Sue McCracken, Pastor

“A God of Love...And Suffering??”

It seems to me that it's important for Christian believers to contemplate really serious questions about our beliefs, especially in times of disasters leading to many deaths like we are seeing from this COVID-19 pandemic. One question I've had to ask myself recently is simply, do I really believe 'God is Love, all the time' like I ask us to affirm at the end of each service, or do I believe in a God of vengeance, like some books of the Old Testament indicate, sending various tragedies our way to teach us lessons?

I think it's one of those topics worth exploring since there seem to be a lot of theories going around these days about the possible cause of this viral pandemic.

It's hard not to think about all the suffering that is going on in many of our current lives when we are immersed in the aftermath of this virus. As humans with limited understanding, we often want an answer for why these things are happening! And it seems like there are many religious 'authorities' (or at least many who BELIEVE they are authorities) who seem to be certain that they know why these bad things are happening in our lives today. For example....when the waves receded from 2004's South Asian tsunami, leaving hundreds of thousands dead, American television evangelists voiced somewhat repugnant and arrogant opinions such as: "God was punishing those Muslims and Hindus for the way they treated Christians in their countries," and "God was using the tsunami to warn the rest of us to mend our ways or else." And here's another example: the 2005's Hurricane Katrina inspired Franklin Graham to proclaim that God targeted New Orleans because it's a 'wicked city' full of sexual perversion and satanic worship'. And similarly, Pat Robertson has repeatedly said the AIDS epidemic was God's punishment for homosexuality and using unclean needles to inject drugs.

So with this current pandemic? Once again, according to some pastors, God has been the designated 'fall guy' causing the virus to spread because of a variety of different human sins. The pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas with 14,000 followers, is telling the world that this virus is just the beginning

of the end of the world that was forecast in the book of Revelation, and the rapture is coming soon.

There are certainly numerous examples of the ancient Jews also trying to figure out suffering, certainly believing God was punishing them. The author who penned these words in Psalm 38 certainly wasn't thinking God was a God of love, all the time! Listen:

LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath. Your arrows have pierced me, and your hand has come down on me. Because of your wrath there is no health in my body; there is no soundness in my bones because of my sin I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning. My back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body. I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart.

And, of course, there was suffering in the New Testament and the question, where is God in it all? – was even on the lips of Jesus as he hung on the cross in agony wondering:

“My God, My God....why have you forsaken me?”

Once again I think the question becomes, ‘what can I learn from these ancient people about the kind of God I should believe in?’ (people who had no understanding of science and disease, wars, and power hungry men)? There are definitely examples in scripture that cause us to stop and reconsider this idea of a punishing God such as the prophet Jeremiah – often called the weeping prophet – so distraught when the Babylonians conquered Israel and carted all the Jews off to Babylon.

Jeremiah doesn't tell the people it's their own fault and God is punishing them, but instead gives them these words in chapter 29: vs. 10-13:

“This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will

listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."

And later, Paul also knew suffering with something he described as his 'thorn in the flesh;' eventually coming to understand that it was God's grace that would see him through his problems.

So what are some other ways we can consider for dealing with our current 'why' questions?

The first comes from Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel in his book, *Night*, as he recounted his time in the Auschwitz death camp. As Wiesel returned from his work duty one afternoon, he was forced to line up to watch the execution of three fellow Jews, one of which was just a young boy. As the three hung from the gallows' ropes, the two men died shortly, but the boy's weight wasn't enough for a speedy death and Wiesel - and the thousands of others standing with him - were forced to watch the child swing mercilessly before death finally claimed him. Wiesel heard a man behind him yell, "Where is God now?" and shortly the answer came from another: "Where is he? Here He is - He is hanging here on these gallows.

Another example comes from Rabbi Harold Kushner's son Aaron who was born with progeria, a rare, incurable disease that causes rapid aging. The doctors explained that Aaron would never grow much beyond three feet in height, would have no hair on his head or body, and would look like an old man when he was still a child. When he was 14, Aaron died of old age. And his death forced Kushner to reconsider his view of God as an all-powerful force who controls everything with a master plan that humans simply don't understand. What came out of losing his son to this disease was his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Kushner didn't understand why his son was born with the disease, and simply admitted there just aren't always reasons why bad things happen.

And one final example comes from the life of William Sloan Coffin, a Christian clergyman and long-time peace advocate. In December of 1982, Coffin's 21 year old son William drove off a bridge into Boston harbor and drowned. A woman tried to comfort Coffin by saying "I just don't understand God's will." An angry Coffin shouted back at her, "I'll say you don't understand God's will, lady. Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper, that Alex was probably driving too fast in such a storm, that

Alex had no street lights along that stretch of road, no guard rail separating the road and Boston Harbor?”

And here’s the important thought Coffin later shared: *“For some reason I can’t get it through people’s heads that God doesn’t run around the world pulling trigger fingers, clenching knives, turning steering wheels. God is dead set against all kinds of unnatural deaths. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex died – but that when the waves closed in over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all hearts to break.”*

When we try to offer superficial answers in the light of catastrophes of such magnitude of the thousands of lives lost in this current pandemic, it’s clear God needs to be understood quite differently – a God of love, not vengeance. If we believe the often-spouted theory that God is trying to teach his creation a lesson with catastrophes, doesn’t that make God a monster?

So where IS God in the midst of suffering and death? Can we simply believe God is with us when we grieve, when we mourn? We so want to assign human traits to a spirit God; but what if we simply relied on the Spirit of God within each of us (since scripture tells us we are created in God’s image) not to give us answers, but to simply give us comfort? One of the most often quoted Psalms, the 23rd, also reminds us in these verses that:

***“Even though I walk
through the valley of shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff,
they comfort me.***

What if we quit trying to search out some deeper meaning for tragedies and simply looked for ways we might offer love, understanding, and compassion to those who are suffering?

There’s a lot of pain and suffering in the world, especially right now, and the Divine is there. Our call as compassionate people of faith is to work toward overcoming evil and injustice in whatever forms they manifest themselves, and to stand as witnesses to the presence of a loving God. As we do all we can to facilitate healing and reconciliation, offering comfort in a hurting world, we

become the embodiment of an answer to the question, 'Where is God when bad things happen'. And we will be there.

I'd like to close with:

"A Blessing Prayer" by Marcina Wiederker

What is a blessing but a rain of grace falling generously in the lives of those in need; and who among us is without need?

May the Spirit touch your spirit in this midmorning pause.

May this day be a pathway strewn with blessings.

May your work this day be your love made visible.

May you breathe upon the wounds of those with whom you work with today.

May you open yourself to God's breathing.

May you honor the flame of love that burns inside you.

May your voice this day be a voice of encouragement.

May your life be an answer to someone's prayer.

May you own a grateful heart.

May you have enough joy to bring you hope, enough pain to make you wise.

May there be no room in your heart for hatred.

May you be free from violent thoughts.

When you look into the window of your soul, may you see the face of God.

May the lamp of your life shine upon all you meet this day.

So go today looking for ways to be compassionate and looking to see that of God in each one you meet, believing in a God of love! Because as we affirm each week, ***God is love, all the time...and all the time, God is love!***