

McCabe United Methodist Church
How Do We Make Sense of God's Will? (Part 1)
"Why Do Innocents Suffer?"
Genesis 1:27-28; John 1:1-5, 14
12-30-12
Pastor Ray Baker

Pastor Rick and I are starting a new sermon series called: How Do We Make Sense of God's Will? We will discuss:

1. Why Do the Innocents Suffer?
2. Why Do my Prayers Go Unanswered?
3. Why Can't I See God's Will for My Life?
4. Why God's Love Prevails

This series is based on a book, "Why, Making Sense of God's Will," by Pastor Adam Hamilton.

Why do the Innocents suffer? Why do they suffer from disease, natural catastrophes, and man's inhumanity to man?

This is a difficult topic because it necessitates a conversation about the "Nature of God" and the "Nature of the world." So often we hear people say God is All Powerful and All Knowing. There are plenty of Bible verses which back up these statements.

1. God said to Abraham: "I am Almighty God; walk before me and be blameless" (Genesis 17:1).
2. God said: "Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh. Is there anything too hard for me?" (Jeremiah 32:27).
3. Job said: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2).

Many people find comfort in these verses and other verses like them. They believe this gives order to the world and order to all that happens in their lives. Enough said. End of story.

For others, an important question remains: How can we understand God as: "All Powerful" ... "All Knowing" ... and "All Loving" ... when innocents suffer.

A number of Christians (I hope they are a minority) find comfort in the idea that God sometimes causes suffering in the world through catastrophic events as a punishment for people they consider sinful.

For example, when the H.I.V. – A.I.D.s epidemic captured our countries attention, in the 80's and 90's; when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, in 2005; and when the earth quake hit Haiti, in 2009; Televangelist's, like Pat Robertson, took to the airways and said God was punishing these people for their sins. Their sins were homosexuality and I.V. drug use, licentious living, and practicing the Voodoo religion, respectively.

Of course, in each of these situations innocent people (even by the Televangelists standards) lost their lives and/or their homes were destroyed.

- There were babies who were born with H.I.V. and died from A.I.D.s, faithful partners were infected and died from the virus, and health care workers were infected and died as well.
- The majority of people in New Orleans have little or nothing to do with the licentious living on Bourbon Street or in the Casinos.
- Haiti has a large population of people who are members of the Christian faith.

A great number of Christian men, women, and children...the innocents...suffered and died during these events. *All of this pain and suffering was caused by the hand of GOD? I don't think so.*

The Gospel of John begins by stating the Word of God has existed since the dawn of time. The Word and God are One. God sent the Word into the world so we would more fully understand God's nature...the Word is "...full of grace and truth." Not vengeance, punishment, suffering...especially not for the innocents.

I'm pretty sure the majority of United Methodist would agree God doesn't kill hundreds of thousands of people by causing viruses, diseases, and natural disasters. Yes, we understand there is a natural order to the world; things like disease, hurricanes, and earthquakes are natural occurring events. But, we would never dream of assigning blame to God for the deaths of innocent children and innocent adults who lost their lives in these tragedies...no matter what their way of life may have been.

What about the tragic events caused by humanity? Why doesn't God stop them from happening? For example, if God is "All Powerful" and "All Knowing" how could God

stand by and watch the massive loss of life in events such as the Holocaust, Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, or 9-11? How could God allow children to be killed in their school, people to be shot to death in a movie theater, or people to be slain at a political rally outside a supermarket?

Today's passage from Genesis 1:27-28 teaches us God has given humanity dominion over all of creation. *God has charged us with responsibility for our actions toward creation and toward each other.*

We have the ability to act in accordance with God's teachings: as stewards of all creation who treat each other with mutuality and respect, with love and kindness. Or we can turn away from what God has taught us. *We call this free will.* But we need to remember; when we don't follow God's teachings ...we are no longer free.

Are you familiar with *the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence*? It's named after James Brady, the former Whitehouse Press Secretary, who was shot and permanently disabled during an assassination attempt on President Regan, in 1981. According to their statistics in one year "Almost 100,000 people in America are shot in (successful and attempted) murders, assaults, suicides, accidents, or by police intervention."

- "31,593 people died from gun violence
 - 12,179 people murdered.
 - 18,223 people killed themselves.
 - 592 people killed accidentally.
 - 326 killed by police intervention.
 - 273 died but intent was not known."

"EVERY DAY (on average) 270 people in America, 47 of them children and teens are shot in murders, assaults, suicides, accidents, and police intervention."
(www.bradycampaign.org)

I don't know how to stop the violence. That's above my pay grade. (So, ask Pastor Rick.) What I do know is we need to stop blaming the other guy/gal and learn how to take an all-inclusive look at the issues. The issues include a lack of faith in God, the lack of action by God's followers, the accessibility of firearms, proper storage of firearms, poverty, mental illness, criminal activity, and other factors that I'm not well versed enough to name.

We need to look for answers to stop the violence. We need to do it for the innocents and their families who continue to suffer at the hands of humanity.

As I've mentioned before, one of the best known books on the topic of suffering is: When Bad Things Happen to Good People; by Rabbi Harold Kushner. He wrote this book to make sense of a tragedy in his own family. When his son Aaron was just three (3) years old he was diagnosed with Progeria, a rapid aging disease. Aaron stood at just three feet tall when he died at age fourteen (14). Rabbi Kushner wrote this book to help himself and other people make sense of the tragedies they were experiencing.

I read an article this week in which Rabbi Daniel Gropper wrote the following about Kushner's ideas:

“Wanting desperately to hold onto God's goodness while maintaining that Aaron's death was not caused by anyone's inadvertent or purposeful sin, Kushner concludes that God is not all powerful as the Bible maintains. (I WOULD SAY, GOD CHOSE NOT TO BE ALL POWERFUL.) If God was all powerful and could interfere with our ability to do evil, he concludes, it would make all of us less human. Adam and Eve had to be given the ability to choose to eat or not eat that forbidden fruit. It was their ability to choose between good and evil that differentiated them, and us, from animals.

Kushner teaches that God's goodness allows us to respond to and cope with the disaster. God is present with us through the love and support of friends, family and community. It is God who gives us inspiration and hope and the strength to handle difficult situations.” (Rabbi Daniel Gropper, Community Synagogue, Yom Kippur 5772)

Why do innocents suffer? I'm not able to give you THE DEFINITIVE answer. I hope my thoughts and comments have helped you wrestle with your questions. Just as Jacob wrestled with the angel...we need to wrestle with God about this important question. After all, we live out our faith by exploring or living the questions.

May God bless us and the innocents on the journey as we wrestle with this important question. Amen.