

Read Lesson: Romans 8: 28, 31-32, 37-39

Let us pray: O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our risen redeemer. Amen.

Ok, so here's the human predicament: God is good, but life isn't fair, and parts of it stink. Death, disease, destruction, depression, and despair are constant companions along our journey of life, and there doesn't seem to be any pattern, any rhyme or reason for much of it as it happens.

How do we cope with the pain we experience? How do we make sense out of suffering?

In an earlier sermon, we talked about the "why" of evil and suffering. If God is loving and powerful, why do we experience the pains of life? Why is there suffering if a good God is in control?

We made three affirmations. First, God is good and creation is good. Evil and suffering are problems, aberrations in the created order. Bad isn't the way things are supposed to be. Second, we explained that most evil is a result of freedom misused. God has given us freedom so we can love and believe and hope in God, but we and others have used our freedom to turn away from God. This is sin, and because of these selfish choices, evil comes into the world. Finally, God answers evil by entering our pain. God becomes one with us in our suffering and death by suffering and dying on the cross in Jesus Christ. Through his pain, our pain is redeemed.

That's the why of evil and suffering. Today, we want to turn to the "what now?" question. There's nothing we can do about the presence of pain in our lives. Pain will happen. But given the reality of suffering, what do we do now? How do we respond? How do we cope? What answers can we find in Scripture that will give us hope?

Suffering can either make or break your faith. It can cut either way. There's a story about two rabbis who were imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. One had lost his faith and said, "There is no God." The other kept his faith and said, "God will rescue us."

Both were finally sent to the death showers to be gassed. The believer kept saying, "God will rescue us," until he entered the building, and then he began to say, "There is no God."

The unbeliever, who had made fun of the other rabbi's faith, entered the death chamber and began to pray the Shema y'isroel, the fundamental confession of the Jewish faith. In the end he believed.

It's the two thieves on the cross, one choosing to deride Jesus, the other having faith. It's the free will thing. Faced with suffering and death, we can decide to be people of faith or not.

That's good news: in the face of suffering and death, we can decide to be people of faith. Faith is a possibility even in times of suffering. Do you know when the church grows most vigorously? When it's being persecuted.

Where's the Christian church growing today? Not in the United States or in Europe, but in Russia, China, the Middle East, and Africa -- places where being a Christian is dangerous and sacrificial. It's when we're on the edge of destruction that we sense our need of God most acutely.

Francis Cosgrove told of a friend who was a concert pianist and organist. Playing beautiful music was her life. Suddenly she began to develop a numbness in her right hand that was intermittent at first, but then became constant and forced her to retire.

In frustration she vowed before God never to serve or set foot in a house of worship again. Soon after that her doctor told her that she would never play again.

Though she thought God didn't care, God was at work to surround her with a group of loving Christian friends who kept supporting and encouraging her, though they couldn't guarantee that she would regain use of her hand. Finally one day she relented and asked Christ to be Lord of her life again. She prayed, "Lord, if I never play again, it's okay."

A week after this woman's renewal of faith, she went to a new doctor who thought he could help her. After a series of 12 operations over three years, she began to play five minutes a day. In another year and a half, she was serving the Lord as organist at her church.

But more importantly, she was a person of faith who had ultimately turned to God in her suffering and had experienced God's grace.

Suffering can be a learning experience if we're open to it. Every great person of faith that I know of has experienced suffering. What sets them apart is their ability to learn and grow from their adversity. Pain can be a great teacher.

Paul went through all kinds of suffering, persecution, and hardship as he carried the gospel to the world in the first century. Yet he was able to write these words to the Roman Christians: "We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:2-5).

When the going becomes difficult, Christians trust God. When the obstacles are overwhelming, Christians rely on Christ to get them through. Suffering makes us depend on God.

Marc Herrienger was a young businessman in Boston several years ago when a moment of absolute suffering changed his life. There had been a snowstorm and he was shoveling snow out of his driveway. His wife asked him to watch their two-year-old daughter while she moved the car. As the car backed out, Marc and his wife were plunged into the worst nightmare a parent can imagine. Their toddler was crushed beneath a wheels of the car and she died in his arms.

Initially the grief was so deep that Marc had to ask God to help him breathe, to eat, to get dressed and move about the house. Slowly over time, Marc felt God working in his life to bring healing, restoration of joy, and a new purpose in life.

Eventually Marc left the business world to enter seminary and become a pastor, where he uses his own devastating experiences as a connection with others who are lost in their own suffering. They want to know this Jesus, this God who enters our pain. Out of suffering has come endurance, character, and hope, not only for the Herriengers, but for many people.

Marc says, "Sometimes people scoff at our belief that God can cause good to emerge from our pain if we run toward God instead of away.

But I've watched it happen in my own life.
I've experienced God's goodness through deep pain, and no one can dispute that.

The God whom some deny is the same God who held our hands in the deep, dark places, who strengthened our marriage, who deepened our faith, who increased our reliance on God's word, who gave us two more children, and who infused our lives with new purpose and meaning so that we can make a difference to others."

It's only when you've been through suffering and been delivered from the brink of destruction, that you can truly appreciate the way God works for good in the midst of tragedy or evil. Grace experienced through suffering can make us grateful to God.

In the wake of a terrible week for Ned Yost, there's power in the Sparky Anderson story.

Sparky Anderson coached teams to the World Series in both the National and American Leagues -- Cincinnati's Big Red machine in 1975 and '76, and the Detroit Tigers in 1984. But even this Hall of Fame manager had a bad season or two.

In 1989 Detroit finished with 59 wins and 103 losses -- a miserable record, the first season in two decades Sparky had ever fallen below .500. He was so ashamed and embarrassed and upset he left the team for 17 days. Looking back on it now, this Methodist-turned-Catholic says, "If you think you're destined never to fail, you better keep one eye open when you fall asleep at night. For my first nineteen years as a manager I was blessed by so much good fortune I thought maybe the devil had forgotten where I lived.

In 1989, I found out that Sparky Anderson has to pay his dues, too. I never got over the point of bleeding a little bit after every loss, but I finally learned to let go. I can't say I'm happy with the pain I went through in 1989. But I'm grateful for what it taught me."

Being grateful for suffering seems like the most idiotic idea ever, and it is -- especially in this shallow, pain-avoiding culture we live in. But when you face your trials in faith, when you learn what God can teach you through the valleys of life, when you develop a dependence on God that gives your life a

solid foundation, then you can appreciate what Paul's talking about when he says, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28, NIV).

Maybe that doesn't happen for you in a mathematically proportionate way; how can enough good things happen to justify the death of a child or a terrorist attack? But if God can work to bring some good out of these horrible situations, to leave at least a glimmer of hope and faith and love in a devastating situation, then that's a miracle of divine proportions.

In the midst of our suffering, we can be grateful for that.

Ultimately the question isn't, "Can God bring anything good out of evil?" Rather the question for the person of faith is "How can I use the experience of God's help in my suffering to minister to others who are hurting?"

There's a comic strip called "Pontius' Puddle" about a frog who gets in theological discussions with God and his pondmates. One day Pontius asks God, "Why do you allow suffering, injustice, poverty, and pain in the world?" The answer comes back from heaven, "I was just about to ask you the same question!"

Having been redeemed through suffering, we become partners with God in redeeming the suffering of the world. While, ultimately it only happens through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, we can help bring that gift, that grace to bear in our church, in our homes, in our schools, in our workplaces, in our community, and in our world.

"In all things" -- good and bad -- "God works for the good of those who love God and are called according to God's purpose." How does this work? It works because our God is a God of love, and no evil in this world can make God stop loving each and every one of God's children. Nothing cuts us off from the love of God.

My favorite verses of scripture come from Paul in Romans 8: "What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ...Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...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." (Romans 8:31-32, 35, 37-39)

That's an assurance we can live with. No matter how deep our suffering, God's love is deeper still.

God is good. Life isn't fair; parts of it stink. So what now? How do we cope? My answer this morning from living this life with plenty of pain is that we make the decision not to react in fear but to respond in faith. We learn from our experiences. We learn to depend on God. We develop an attitude of gratitude for God's help. And we use our experiences, even our suffering, as a way to be in ministry to others and to serve God.

This is the life that will bring you through the night of suffering into a brand new day. Amen!