

GENESIS 29:15-28

PSALM 105:1-11, 45b

ROMANS 8:26-39

MATTHEW 13:31-33, 44-52

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost; Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 30, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Not So Fast?

The good life! We see that affirming, warm and fuzzy, phrase on t-shirts and various other media. Whatever the good life is, it is something to which we all aspire. We all want it! All people desire to live the good life, to be happy, to pursue happiness and all the myriad things that bring immediate joy and existential pleasure. As the song sings, “happiness is different things to different people, that’s what happiness is!” Truly, we all find satisfaction in our own unique ways, one person’s pleasure, another person’s so what! Whether it be a hobby or an activity, this life affords something for everyone, from the ridiculous to the sublime. Living the good life is a good goal as long as it is never injurious to another. In his letter to the Romans the apostle Paul declared “we know that God works things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to God’s purpose.” It all sounds so nice, so comforting, a promise assuring and reassuring faithful believers in Christ that everything is always going to turn out just right, just fine, everything coming up roses! Well, as Lee Corso says on college football Gameday on ESPN, Not so fast! All of us have experienced life’s curve balls, the dark side of living, the agony of existence when things go wrong, very wrong. The question for today as we ponder Paul’s musings here in his epistle to the Roman church is just what gives, what do these presumably words of promising succor, what do they mean? What do they mean when juxtaposed against life’s tragic moments, damning disasters and disease, agonizing despair and death? And, of course, “why?” Why do bad things happen to good people? Why is there evil? As the Psalmist once wrote, “why do the heathen rage?” (Psalm 2:1-4). Why do they prosper? Today we travel a

homiletical road of darkness and light, hoping to find our equilibrium for living, the balance necessary to get us through the living of our days as we live and move and have our being, all the while giving our hopes and dreams, our best aspirations, even the remotest chance. Somewhere amidst the awe and wonder of mystery, and it is always mystery in matters of belief and faith in God, transcendence, it is at this intersection of good and bad, the best and worst, celebration and pain and sorrow, we find ourselves teetering between the polarities of Job and joy!

R. Page Fulgham sets the stage for our homiletical discussion in the first chapter of his book addressing these issues while challenging and confronting conventional wisdom that frequently is not. Reminding us of images of the character Job in the biblical book that bears his name, Page begins, “Laura’s story is repeated all too often. Her mother died a slow death from Alzheimer’s disease, and then her brother developed colon cancer and died. Next, Laura’s husband committed suicide, and within just a few months, her fourteen-year-old son was killed in a car accident. A few years later, Laura’s dad ended his own life. Laura had contracted polio as a child and eventually developed Alzheimer’s and died. My first question is, ‘Why is there so much suffering in the world?’ Next, ‘Why would one person have so much suffering?’ Then, I want to know, ‘Can I honestly believe in a God of love and power when God cannot prevent or does not choose to prevent suffering?’”¹ And off we go!

In many ways Paul’s seemingly naïve promise that God is working all things together for good, with the caveat “for the ones who love God,” an important nuance me thinks. Paul’s declaration sounds a lot like, is very similar to another theological assumption that the apostle makes in I Corinthians 10:13, declaring, “No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and God will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing God will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.” Well, as you know full well, that verse has been twisted almost beyond repair and recognition, perversely misinterpreted to the point where uninformed biblicists boldly, but erroneously, falsely, proclaim, “God will never put more on you than

¹R. Page Fulgham, *Evil and the Garden of Good: Exploring the Mystery of Suffering* (Smyth and Helwys Publishing, Macon, GA, 2023), 1.

you can handle.” That line does not appear in the text! It is not even suggested, nowhere intimated in the least. It is not there! Ironically, while we are chasing biblical rabbits, Paul also maintains in II Corinthians 1:9 “I wrote for this reason: to test you and to know whether you are obedient in everything,” Paul seems to speak on God’s behalf as the apostle indicates that suffering is not necessarily a bad thing. I beg to differ! So, which is it Paul, does God test us or not, does God allow our suffering or not! What then does it mean for all things working together for those who love God? Inquiring, doubting, skeptical, cynical, minds want to know? **Perhaps the answer to our dilemmas lies somewhere in the middle but, like a long road trip for a child, we are not there yet! Hang on!**

As I read these Pauline words again, trying as I always do to read them as if for the first time—a practice I highly recommend—I am quick to ask myself the age-old theological question regarding theodicy. Theodicy is simply the idea about if, when, and how, God chooses to interact, yes, intervene, in the world, an occurrence that happens far more frequently in biblical days than it does in ours. As Bill Engvall of the Blue-Collar Comedy Tour would say, “Here’s your sign!” As one source notes, theodicy is a Greek term combining *theos* (God) with *dike* (righteous) and is the “attempt to justify or defend God in the face of evil by answering the following problem, which in its most basic form involves these (three) assumptions: 1) God is all good and all powerful (and, therefore, all knowing); 2) The universe/creation was made by God and/or exists in a contingent relationship to God; 3) Evil exists in the world. Why?” Folks, anytime we try and rationalize a defense for the Holy we are already in way over our heads, all our language lacking! No, these biblical events surely did not literally occur the way they are purported in holy writ! That is my story, and I am sticking with it!

The pivotal question raised by the odyssey of theodicy is the question for the ages, a conundrum addressed by numerous theologians down through the centuries, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” From scholars such as Walter Brueggemann, Kathleen O’Connor, John Hick, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and E. Frank Tupper, just to name a few, to a humble Jewish rabbi named Harold Kushner in a 1981 book that quickly became a best seller, persons of every faith would like the answer to that complex, complicated, question. The

newest attempt just recently published, and a fabulous one indeed, after all he wisely quotes me in the book, was written by R. Page Fulgham, called *Evil and the Garden of Good: Exploring the Mystery of Suffering*. The first sermon I ever wrote, yes, my very first attempt was for my preaching class in seminary with Dr. James Cox. The sermon was titled “Evil and Suffering: A Christian Response,” and was published in *Pulpit Digest*. I add that caveat because it is a reminder that this subject has long been on our minds as followers of Jesus, constantly tormenting our spirits, haunting our souls like an unfriendly ghost, an issue that personally and professionally dogs me, and I am assuming all of us, at every turn. The writer of John’s Gospel asked the pivotal question, “who sinned, this man of his parents, that he was born blind?” This obsession was on the minds of the ancients who believed the Ten Commandments when it proclaimed that God punishes from generation to generation. This trauma inducing belief was constantly on the minds of the ancients. All of us have lost loved ones via immense pain and suffering, cancer being a particularly invasive evil, reflecting whatever comprises our image of catastrophic human suffering. We have seen the ravages of natural disasters, yes, the rain falling on the just and the unjust, and have witnessed the worst insults of demonic human behavior. Let us count the ways! We want answers and not pabulum, Pollyanna platitudes that waste our time and mental energy. Claiming God’s will, “just trust God,” or, “there but by the grace of God go I” just does not cut it in the short term or for the long run. Yes, we walk by faith, but our sight is often blurred, even shocked and mortified at the insult and injury we see ensnaring us, swirling around us.

The questions flood our minds, filling us with doubts, challenging our desire to believe by faith, by faith alone to use an image from the Protestant Reformation. If God, then “why?” If God is good, working for all things good, as Paul claims and proclaims, then “why?” If God, then why does God either allow or create suffering, not a good choice in the least. The cross is literally a cross section of our dilemma, Jesus’ crucifixion a reminder of all human suffering from the time of creation right up until now. If there was no God or if we did not believe in God, we would have no questions, nothing to ask, certainly nothing of eternal merit. Our conscience would not force us to ask “why?” All our speculation, devoid of a deity, would allow us a simple and perfunctory ask and answer! Yes, without God the universe would make perfect sense, no explanations needed! Science would stand alone!

But we are a believing people and sometimes belief is complicated! We are not among the naïve but are rather well informed, intellectually curious, critically thinking. We are a people of faith, sensing deep in our being that there is something, a divine something, beyond ourselves and this world, yes, a God who is out of this world! We are not gullible or stupid! Our thoughts, our feelings, our sensory awareness, are real! So, agonize we must! Struggle we must! Wrestle, we must! Wrestling imagery, by the way, is a teaser for a text and the sermon next Sunday! We have no option but to engage if we are to stay in this game!

The conundrum we face when reading Paul's theological musings is that if God is love, the very essence of pure love, yes, the total sum, then how is there room for evil? And do not give me the cheap and cheesy answer that human depravity, when it is expressed and exposed, is a direct result of Original Sin, Adam and Eve's escapades with the serpent and a fruit the cause as is blamed in the second creation story from Genesis. Biblical mythology, when used in this narrow way, is even more detrimental, more damaging to fragile and otherwise human psyches. Besides, misusing the Bible in that simplistic way is just too easy! Contrary to popular opinion, the good book is not an answer manual! We must acknowledge that Paul, a Pharisee among the Jews prior to his Christian conversion, continued to interpret and understand the Christ event as the fulfillment of Hebrew Bible—Old Testament—prophecy. He never could let that go! No surprise there! Thus, Paul accepted the fall as vividly portrayed in Genesis. Besides, Paul had no concept about the context of these writings as we are now privy thanks to the tools of modern biblical scholarship! Original Sin became a doctrine embraced by Augustine, one of the early Church Fathers, benignly accepted and galvanized by early Catholicism, maintained by the Protestant reformers, and promulgated right up until today by traditionalists intent on preserving orthodoxy. That is, until now, save for a flock like us, those of us who now have the audacity, daring to question the merits of what seems archaic creedal nonsense, all of it strangely spawning a patriarchal hierarchy for the ages. Augustine believed that sinners needed to be punished for evil and wickedness. Punishment was the way God was appeased, yes, the way God did God's bidding! Another Church Father, Irenaeus, believed that evil was a part of the natural order, a fate of creation in the universe, and that God did not inflict such peril upon the human creature. Guess which doctrinal view won? It was and

continues to be an easy, a convenient and tidy way to control and manipulate, yes, if God carries a big stick instead of a lovingly gracious carrot. Finally, another lesser-known Church Father named Lactantius (240-320 CE), an adviser to the emperor Constantine, quoted from Epicurus the classic dilemma, “God . . . either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He (forgive the Father’s sexist language) is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing or able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? Or why does He not remove them?”² Great questions all that make our heads swim! Fulgham offers a counter view given by Steven T. Davis, professor of philosophy and religion at Claremont McKenna College, who restates the problem another way: 1) If God is omnipotent, God is able to prevent human suffering; and if God is perfectly morally good, God must want to prevent human suffering; 2) Human suffering exists; 3) Therefore, no omnipotent and perfectly morally good God exists.”³ Folks, none of this conjecture is satisfying in any way. There must be another way! There has to be an alternative! We cannot simply settle based on all the miscalculations we have long accepted at face value because of someone else’s biblical interpretation or a traditionalist’s reinforcing affirmation. **Yes, we are doing a retake, a reexamination, recalibrating and retrofitting the Tradition, reconsidering biblical Church Teaching that we have always benignly bobble-headedly accepted as just the way it was and is. No more! Never again! Yes, we human types do commit sins and sin, we are prone to err, to make mistakes, minor and major, our egregiously colossal, ginormous, ones costing us dearly on occasion. But God does not hold these blunders against us. God never seeks vengeance or any form of retributive justice. God refuses to exact an ounce of our flesh because God might could, because we stray from the straight and narrow, God’s Golden Rule, the plumbline standard of love and grace, mercy and peace. God needs no retribution. We believe that God is forgiving as well as loving. Yes, God is bigger than the jealous, immature, petulant, petty, deity portrayed in the Hebrew Bible. That God is a poor facsimile, a mirage, an**

²Ibid., 12.

³Ibid.

imposter exposed by the God revealed by Jesus, the rabbinic man from Nazareth.

And this long conversation brings us full circle back to Paul's affirming declaration that "God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to God's purpose." Perhaps in the mysterious universe in which a transcendent God lives and moves and literally has being as Spirit, we can no more get into the mind of Paul in the moment he wrote these words than we can begin to know the veracity of what he was saying or attempting to convey. Perhaps Paul was telling the Roman congregation to live each moment as if it were to be their last on earth, to cherish every minute and every relationship, to embrace all the goodness of creation and the wonderful siblings, brothers and sisters all, who formed this glorious community, this fledgling expression of what was now believed to be Christ's Church in this local Roman manifestation. We must remember the irony in Paul's words, not tongue in cheek in the least! He was writing in Rome, the seat of imperial power, Caesar's very playpen, his front and backyard! These early Christians were becoming martyrs day by day, day after day, subject to the most horrific atrocities as they were burned at stakes, fed to lions, slaughtered by gladiators, terrorized and tortured in every agonizing way imaginable, persecution the price for admission to Jesus' realm. Who would buy a ticket to that, paradise delayed! Even so, Paul basically tells the faithful that all is well, affirming that all is good and will be good. Yes, despite! No, it is not pabulum, pious laden Pollyanna platitudes, but is the foundation of faith, our faith, and everything we are about today in our contemporary, postmodern, world is a matter of faith, belief that is not seen but is as real as reality ever unfolds.

Paul proclaims that if Christ is for us who can be against us? This being the same Christ who was crucified as a peasant accused of leading an insurrection, convicted as a common criminal, his fate no better than those early pilgrims who would follow. Paul asks, "Who will separate us from the love of God?" Yes, you can destroy the body, but you cannot touch the human spirit, the soul that belongs to God. God's love, no matter present, extenuating, circumstances, as difficult, as horrific, as they may very well be, will not be diminished, will not be destroyed. Our capacity is in the God who made us! Paul says this, invoking a quote in ancient words from Psalm 44:22, "We are being put to death all day

long for your sake. We are treated like sheep for slaughter.” Paul asks, “Will we be separated by trouble, or distress, or harassment, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?” The short answer might seem to be yes, but the long view says no! Paul declares, “But in all these things,” yes, horrible, horrific things, “we win a sweeping victory through the one who loved us. I am convinced”, he says, “that nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.” Well said!

I close with a poem titled “Why Me, O God?” written by R. Page Fulgham in 1971. The words are as profound and relevant now as they were then:

*‘Why me, O God?’ asks the man in pain.
‘Do I deserve this? Am I to blame?
Could you have made me less than I am,
Never to wonder, only led like a lamb?
What does this mean, O Lord? Is there an end?
Will I struggle in life for death to win?
Show me your love! Let me feel your grace.
Give me hope to overcome the waste.
Let me see the sorrow my sin has worn,
And know God’s tears, which love has borne?’⁴*

My hunch is that I have only managed to raise more questions in this sermon, answers being far beyond our grasp and our limited, finite, capacity in our theological and spiritual quests. There is nothing that we know! There is only that which we believe! There is only faith! In the final analysis, we are left only with faith and, frankly, what more would we want, what more could we want. Yes, the universe is working toward good! God is working toward good! All things, including you and me, are working together for good, and I believe, for those who love God and including those who do not! Sorry about that one Paul. We just disagree! Love God! Love neighbor! Love self! The question and the answer is love, and love is always love, yes, every time, all the time! Love, love, love!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and is lovingly working all things for good! Amen and amen.

⁴Ibid., XVIII.