

This week I went with Heather and my in-laws to bury Heather's grandfather. It was a beautiful cemetery. Being the genealogy, archaeology and history buff I am, I began to take pictures of the tombstones and I noticed that there was a lot of pain & suffering in this cemetery (show infant graves and point out the love & care for these children Heather's ancestors took).

After story mention Tyron Inbody's book *Faith of the Christian church* as a wonderful resource. Also, invite someone who has further questions to make an appointment with me during the week for further exploration.

Quoting Inbody:

No human experience challenges our faith in a sovereign and benevolent God more deeply than the suffering caused by the violence of individuals, communities, and nature.' Although most of us have a strong sense of the goodness and well-being of our lives, our experience of pain, suffering, conflict, war, disease, plague, famine, hardship, hatred, cruelty, terror, destruction, and utter madness are just as real.

The twentieth century was so dominated by wars that it has been called "the century of violence." The genocide of the Holocaust is a primary symbol of the century. This conceptual problem in theology is called theodicy. Technically formulated, the problem of theodicy is thus: If God is omnipotent, God could prevent all evil. If God is all-loving, God would want to prevent all evil. But there is evil in the world.

This is where the challenge comes in. When we get into suffering situations, what we want are real answers, certainty, pure explanation that can make everything ok again. What we don't want is bromides, and that unfortunately is what we often get in these awkward, painful situations. One of the things that often infuriates me as a pastor, is the idea that I get from many people when there's a difficult situation and they believe in their heart of hearts that I can say something to make it all better. They believe and they want me to say something to cut through the uncertainty, the pain, and they believe that as the pastor I should have that magical, divine ability.

Suffering is especially painful when it happens to the innocent, like children. We have this idea in our world that children should be blissful and happy and ignorant of the sin and pain of our world. And so when suffering happens to children, like those children in the cemetery in Pinehill, our heart breaks because we see the injustice, and we see the pain that is brought upon by the randomness of suffering. We think of the families who had their hopes for the future brutally dashed by the painful reality of death. But, in suffering we know there are more things than just death. The suffering that is caused by mental illness, diseases like ALS which Sandy Thurgaland just passed away from our reminders that suffering is far more than just dying. Suffering can also seem almost preordained, because there are things like hurricanes, forest fires, and just random events that cause us immeasurable suffering out of purely natural occurrences.

There are many different ways to deal with this question of suffering, and the strategy that you're probably more familiar with is represented by the "Theistic" tradition of Christianity. This has become so embedded in our modern thought that we often take it for granted. This tradition has two great fathers: St. Augustine and John Calvin, who decided to formulate a theology of suffering around God's sovereignty and omnipotence. They faced what we all face - where is God, what is God up to, in the face of suffering and evil? Where is God when bad things happen? This point of view leads many to see suffering and evil as not real - completely subjective and based on a finite mortal perspective and not on God's eternal plan. Their view of

every event, whether suffering-inducing or not, is baked into the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith: "God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatever comes to pass ". If you were confirmed as a Presbyterian, this is part of the creed you affirmed. Taking the logic of this statement, this means that God ordained the most horrible experiences of your life, looked approvingly as you experienced horrible tragedy, injury, or sickness. Is there any wonder many fall from the faith at the hands of a theodicy that goes this route?

Although many Christians are horrified when they see the concept of omnipotence spelled out with such clarity and remorseless logic, they have, nevertheless, internalized this doctrine at the core of their piety. The questions, "Why did God kill my baby?" or "Why did God take my baby?" or "Why did God permit my baby to die?" all presume that God willed and is the ultimate cause of my daughter's death. Attempting to soften the bite of the claim, they say, "Nothing happens that is not the will of God," or, "Everything that happens is part of God's plan for my life." There are no accidents, no chances in life, no good luck or bad luck. All events, even the most minute details, are God's doing.

Many Christians have compelling reasons to advocate this kind of theodicy. Many times you'll hear things like "but without that suffering I wouldn't be the person I am today," or something else like "but there were these good things that came out of it..." *And both those things can certainly be true about suffering.* There is also the saying which is often used by us at the precise wrong time, "God is in control..." really? My child just died, my marriage just broke apart, my mother just died of ALS, and God is in control? Terrorists are taking over countries, our own country is conflicted and polarized, mass shooting after mass shooting, and God is in control? Maybe we need to look at new management, I mean comeon!" Yes, God is, in the ultimate sense, in control and has all our suffering figured out and redeemed, but please don't say that to someone when they've just experienced a tragedy. Say that in a different setting when the person is already assured of God's love and control in a situation. Take it from a pastor who has heard the voices of people who have left the faith because of comments like that.

Even so, many Christians adopt a theistic theodicy because they see it as the only guarantee against the threat to the meaning of their lives and of the whole creation. For millions of Christians, to believe that God caused or willed or permitted the death of my child or the genocides of the twentieth century or the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers is their only assurance that a child's death, or genocides, or the collapse of the towers is not ultimately meaningless. Classical Theism, the point of view we probably hear more than any other, deals with evil by basically denying its existence. Denial is a very natural coping mechanism for people. And it's also important to note that this theodicy is still Christian. Someone who believes this is still a Christian, because they still believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. This theodicy is one way to look at the problem of suffering and evil, and it does help people. But it also does great harm, it gets God's nature a little skewed, and it plays to our greatest temptations. There are other ways to think about suffering, ways which I believe match much closer with the truth of the Bible, the nature of God, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let me start with a question: What is the highest form of power? Is omnipotence the highest form of power? It's certainly what we assume, right? God is God because of all the omni-omnipresence, omniscience, omnibenevolent, all-loving, all those omni-superpowers he has. And right from the beginning, we see God showing us his nature, but it's much different of a show than all the omnis would have you think it is...You heard the scripture this morning, how

God created humanity and what did he do? He gave *us* power, right from the very beginning. This tells us a lot about the nature of God, doesn't it? Then there's this funny thing Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:9

<sup>9</sup> *He said to me, "My grace is enough for you, because power is made perfect in weakness." So I'll gladly spend my time bragging about my weaknesses so that Christ's power can rest on me.*

Paul also writes in Phil 2:7-8:

*Instead, God "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:7-8).*

We think of God's power as being because of all the omni-s, but what if his power is specifically in his laying aside all the omnis to be with us in our pain and suffering? After all, how did God choose to come to us at Christmas—with all the power of a baby's newborn cry. What if the greatest power in the world to counteract evil lies not in omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, or omni-whatever but in God coming to us in the form of the scandalous child of a newlywed working class family making a forced march and then forced to flee to Egypt.

What if God's perfected power lies in weakness, laying down his fame and strength to suffer with us and die innocently, his only crime making the religious authorities mad with his lack of pretension and searing critiques? Is God's power in the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23 who lays his life down for the sheep, or is it in the power to know everything there is to know? Is God's power in micro-managing the world and being a control freak, or is God's power in coming along side humanity in this crazy & sinful world and suffering with us?

What if creation is still an ongoing process, with God at work in the world recreating it from the ground up so that it is free of evil, sin and suffering. What if the suffering in the world is not a product of a God who is in control all the time from above, but a product of good, bad, sin, righteousness and randomness thrown in to the mix together? And what if, within that mix of the good, the bad and the ugly of the world, God is at work within us, nudging us and the whole world to Easter—to *new creation that is born again from above*. Isn't the power of Easter the power of new life in the face of sin and death?

Listen to the words of Ecclesiastes:

*Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all. For no one can anticipate the time of disaster. Like fish taken in a cruel net, and like birds caught in a snare, so mortals are snared at a time of calamity, when it suddenly falls upon them. (Eccles. 9:11-12)*

There is indeed a time for everything under the sun, and nothing is new. God has seen everything before.

And so, thinking of suffering, we try to ascribe it to the will of God, as if God is micromanaging the situation from the outside...but when God gave us himself, when he came to Earth to show us who he was and how he worked, he did none of that, did he? Instead, he came into this suffering world and brought new life, hope, healing to our suffering. He did not fix all our suffering right now, with a magical stroke of his wand but he showed us the way through our suffering to the new life he had in store for us. Many times ascribing suffering to the will of God

is just too much of a stretch, and it alienates people from God instead of bringing them closer to Him.

Sometimes suffering just happens because of the intersection of many different factors and crazy happenstances. When someone gets cancer, it's not because God is in control, it's because the cells in their body began dividing uncontrollably. When a loved one dies too early, like my own father in a car accident, we often try to see the omnipotent God as the controller of the event, but remember he gave us choices, dominion, when God created us...and maybe the fault lies with a human actor and not a divine one. Maybe our loved one died, like my father did, when an exhausted, overworked and sleepy driver in a utility truck ran off the road and accidentally killed him. It wasn't *God's* will any more than it was my fathers!

When someone gets ALS, Alzheimer's, Lupus, or some other cause-less diseases, we try to ascribe it to the will of God but...maybe it just happens because our bodies, just like the world are meeting with the randomness and chaos of a world of original sin, human choices, systematic justice and injustice. There are perfectly good scientific explanations as to why bodily pain, mental anguish, and social oppressions occur. And I believe, alongside that suffering, God is the transforming God, the suffering God who meets Good Friday with the power of Easter every time. That's what he did when he walked among us, and because I am a Christian, someone renewed and born again, I believe God continues to do it to this day.

Methodist theologian John Cobb wrote a beautiful explanation of this idea, comparing it to the different forces of good and evil at work in the WWII concentration camps:

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"Let us take Auschwitz not simply as a paradigm for genuine evil but also as a paradigm for the way the world as a whole and in general is.... But when we look at the world with expectations established by Auschwitz, we will also find much to astonish us. There are many patterns of human relations in which people seem genuinely concerned for the good of others in community.... Must there not be something at work other than narrow and brutal self-interest and absorption of one's own group? Can we not call that God?"

Tyron Inbody. *The Faith of the Christian Church: An Introduction to Theology* (Kindle Locations 2399-2402). Kindle Edition.

So, to wrap things up here, where is God when suffering occurs? He's suffering with us, holding our hands when our spouse is no longer there to do it, loving us unconditionally when no one else does. When everyone else condemns us and tells us we're weird or not good enough, God tells us he loved us and accepts us for who we are, and walks with us to lead us forward. God is resurrection working through us when we pack meals for the hungry and build relationships with strangers while we feed the hungry through our abundance. God is resurrection working through us when we are present at the hospital with a crying family who has just experienced the joy of new life, and also on the next floor of the hospital as another family cries in anguish as life ebbs away from a loved one.

The sovereign power of the triune God is not unilateral power. Sovereign power, the power that is ultimately more effective than unilateral power, is the power of the resurrection. There is no more omnipotent, sovereign, triumphant power than the power of the Creator God to bring "the new creation" out of the open, free, and risky creation. We do not need omnipotent power to answer the deepest challenge to the meaning of our lives, unless what we worship is not the God of the triune identity but rather the God of absolute, unilateral lateral power, which

according to the book of Revelation is the false God of Caesar rather than the ultimate power of the Lamb. The ground of our confidence is the promise God made evident and confirmed by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. "Resurrection power of God does not annihilate the past, it transforms the past."

The Trinitarian God, is not a gentile lord or a cosmic Caesar. God is the God of Jesus Christ, the cross, and resurrection, the God whose power is the power of love and whose might is the power to transform death in its many forms into rebirth, the old creation into "the new creation," the sin, suffering, and death of the old heaven and earth into "a new heaven and earth."

Tyron Inbody. *The Faith of the Christian Church: An Introduction to Theology* (Kindle Locations 2407-2419). Kindle Edition.