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Need and Deed

I wonder what it is like to be God, to be a Person who knows and cares and loves (indeed, infinitely), and to listen to the cries of His people. Our need is so desperate, isn't it? We need water in the desert, we need water to fall on our fires, we need cooling temperatures for our weak and vulnerable, we need cooling temperatures for our planet, we need sight for the blind, hearing for the deaf, work for the unemployed, health for the sick, reassurance for the fearful, security for our beloved, forgiveness for our guilt, love for the unloved, mercy for our obtuseness. Indeed, the whole universe is on a billions-of-years-long trajectory to ultimate death as the fires of life are eventually overcome by the coldness of entropy. For God, the entire universe must be a constant wail of need and supplication: help us.

For those who believe – and their stance is every bit as much a matter of faith as the position of the religionist – for those who believe that God is indifferent or that there is no God, there is no problem. We are an accident, we are in this alone, life is meaningless, live and die as best you can.

But for those of us who believe in a knowing, caring, loving, capable God, there is a problem. For Christians who believe in an all-loving God focused in Jesus Christ on the welfare of all creation, there is a problem. Where is God when we need Her? Does God care about us? What is God doing for us now?

It is the age-old problem of the world's suffering, made personal in our own lives. The Bible makes the problem even worse, I think. The Bible is full of promises of God's care and intervention. We heard some just a few minutes ago: “[God] will come and save you,” according to the prophet Isaiah; the Psalmist told us that “The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind; the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down.”; James tells us that “mercy triumphs over judgment”; Jesus heals a dying girl and a deaf man, but what about all the rest of the deaf and dying in Israel that day, and all the days to come? There are still prisoners, blind, deaf, and many who still need to be saved from all sorts of things. Where is God in all this? Where is God in our need?

We have talked about this issue before in our sermons together, but it is a problem that must be re-visited fairly often, for our need becomes overwhelming and we must have the help of our God. Does God care? Is God there? Is God's compassion only for the few who get it right, rather than the many who get it wrong? How do we live in a world of suffering, our own and that of others?

A Christian priest is at the vortex of this storm. Around a priest – man or woman, ordained or lay, competent or incapable – around a priest rage the energies of creation’s need and God’s care. That’s what a priest is for, to be an aide, a guide, a bridge to the infinite compassion of God. And remember that we are all priests, some few are ordained, the rest are not, but we are all meant by God to be bridges, bridges over the chasm of confusion and need to the safe ground of God.

So what is our answer, we priests of God, what is our answer to the cry from our world for the mercy of our God?

The first part of that answer is integrity, to be absolutely honest with ourselves and with God. It is why Job in the Old Testament book that bears his name is commended by God, because in the midst of his suffering, in the midst of his impatience, in the midst of his anger, he is honest with God. Why is this happening to a just man? He will not be put off by the rationales of those around him, who mouth the cliches of the religion of his time. Job’s integrity eventually calls forth God’s integrity, God’s response and answer. Our integrity must be no less; we must face the hunger, thirst, and pain of our world and seek an answer from God.

The second part of the answer is expectation, our expectations. We have every right to expect justice and mercy from our God, as Job did. The problem comes with understanding what that justice and mercy look like. Is our God a sugar-daddy, there just to dispense answers to our prayers, the answers that we have specified, to give us the health, wealth, and assurance we want? In our Gardens of Gethsemane do we expect God to take the cup of suffering from us? We can certainly ask that, as Jesus did, but then we must emulate Jesus in His response. When the silence of heaven confirms the looming death of the Messiah, Jesus responds, “your will be done.” There is an acceptance of a reality beyond the relatively narrow horizon of our lives. Life comes to Jesus in resurrection, but only after death. Resurrection will come to us as well, but only after death. And that is an answer that will cause us bloody sweat to accept, just as it did Jesus. Where did Jesus put His trust? In His own wants or in the care of God, the love of a God who asked trust and gave life? Where do we put our trust?

The third part of the answer is responsibility, our responsibility, as a community and as individuals. It is what James is talking about in his New Testament letter. Many of the answers to our problems lie within reach of our own hands. That they are still problems is because we have not met our responsibilities to God, to others, and to ourselves. There is enough food to feed the planet’s population; what is missing is our work to make it available to the world’s hungry. There is enough good water for all our needs, but not if nations keep buying up water rights from other impoverished nations. There is healing far beyond what is available now, but only if we reign in the insatiable hunger for profit from the health industry. There is financial security for all, but only if we discipline ourselves to live within our means, both as individuals and as a nation. There is better life for all of us, but only if we are committed to better life for everyone, not just ourself. The welfare of the community must be as important to each of us as our own welfare. Failing that, the need that accuses us is not God’s fault but our own. I guess

what I'm asking is this: is it fair to accuse God of indifference when we have not overcome our own?

Absolute integrity, realistic expectation, responsible action – these can be part of the answer to our world's problems as well as our own. They are certainly part of the answer to the spiritual yearning that each of us feels. Like you, I wish for some sort of divine button to push to make everything all right. We don't get that. What we get is Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus' integrity, Jesus' expectation, Jesus' responsibility. Can we match His with ours?