

Sermon – 8/12/18
“Bread for the World”
Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51
12th Sunday after Pentecost
Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC
Scott Kenefake, Interim Pastor

Have you ever asked, “*What did I do to deserve this?*” or “*I wonder what she did to deserve that?*” Perhaps you’ve heard someone claim that, “*The poor are poor because they are lazy!*” or “*AIDS is punishment from God,*” or “*So and so is suffering because [fill in the blank].*” The problem is, no matter how often people repeat them, these statements are still false.

The truth is, life is hard. If we look at the way the world really is, we see that bad things happen to good people and good things happen to bad people. That’s just the way it is. And that’s probably why struggling with the reality of **evil** and **suffering** in the world has been one of the foundational questions of existence from time immemorial.

Ask yourself: “*If God is all loving, all good, and all powerful, how can evil exist?*”¹

For some, the reality of evil is the best argument **against** God’s existence. They want to know, with all the evil in the world, how can you believe in God?

Libraries of books have been written on the problem of evil, the source of evil, and why the innocent suffer ... Even the most faithful have cried out in despair, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*”

And amid the pain, struggle, and injustice, it’s not always evident how anything good could ever result.

But the evidence suggests that *sometimes*, even the most horrific evil can be redeemed—even in some small way. Suffering can be transformed into endurance, mourning into dancing, and darkness into light.

But despite any glimmers of hope, the problem of evil endures. Each new disaster, abused spouse, or ruthless injustice brings with it the painful questions of *God’s absence* during tragedy and why the innocent suffer.²

For example, Rabbi Harold Kushner’s son, Aaron, was born with *progeria*, a rare and incurable disease that causes rapid aging. When Aaron was three, the doctors explained to the Kushner’s that Aaron would never grow much beyond three feet in height, would have no hair on his head or body, would look like a little old man while he was still a child, and would die in his early teens. When he was 14, Aaron died of old age.

Aaron’s illness and death forced Kushner to reconsider his view of God as an *all- powerful force who controls everything with a master plan that humans simply don’t understand*. The book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, was Kushner’s response, emerging with what was hailed as a new understanding of God, but was, in fact, *ancient wisdom*.

The Psalmist sings:

Where can I go from your spirit?
 Or where can I flee from your presence?
 If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
 If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. (Ps. 139:7-8)

¹ David M. Felten & Jeff Proctor-Murphy, “*Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity*,” Harper One, New York, NY, 2012, p, 92

² *Ibid*, p. 93

Now, in the days of the Psalmist, the Jewish people had no understanding of hell. However, they did speak of a place of the dead called Sheol. Yet the Psalm proclaims that even there one cannot escape God. Such spiritual convictions have bolstered the Jewish people through thousands of years of collective and individual suffering. Despite hatred, oppression, pogroms, and holocaust, they have endured.³

So, the God of the Jews is understood to have suffered their ordeals with them, giving them strength and hope to endure. Alfred North Whitehead calls God the “*fellow sufferer who understands.*”⁴

Often misquoted as, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*, the book makes it clear that Kushner doesn’t know why any more than the rest of us. Sometimes people make bad decisions. Laws of nature and simple bad luck could also be the culprits. There aren’t always *reasons* why bad things happen.⁵

Which brings us to John, Chapter 6—our Gospel reading for today. We’ve seen over the past several Sunday’s (as we have worked our way through Chapter 6) that the Gospel writer has borrowed liberally from the Moses tradition in the Hebrew Scriptures and wrapped them around Jesus as he has crafted stories of the feeding of the multitudes, Jesus walking on water, and the disciples being rescued at sea in the midst of a violent storm. These stories echo (quite deliberately) Moses feeding the Israelites with Manna, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the Exodus, so as to portray Jesus as a “new Moses.”

And today (as earlier), we have more references to Jesus as the “*Bread of Life,*” communion metaphors of bread and wine, (body and blood—symbols of the suffering of Jesus), physical and spiritual food, providing sustenance for the Jesus community. And if we had read through v. 59, (included in the Gospel text for 8/26), we would have discovered that all this teaching took place in the “synagogue at Capernaum” and not out in the wilderness. What’s going on here?

The backstory is a story of *pain and suffering and irreconcilable differences*. You see, in about the year 88 CE, (55-60 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus) the followers of Jesus were literally expelled from the synagogue. Because of this excommunication, this Gospel (John) reflects a rising hostility between the disciples of Jesus and those that this gospel simply calls “*the Jews.*” (The orthodox party that ruled the synagogue; not the Jewish community as a whole).

This conflict, like all religious disputes or family arguments, was filled with pain, recriminations, and bitterness. Those of us who have observed religious disputes closely know that the levels of hostility that mark these disputes cannot be minimized. In this conflict both sides probably said terrible things about the other.

But what we have in John’s Gospel is the product of *only one side of the conflict.*⁶

And into the midst of the pain and suffering of this conflict—a situation in which people are in desperate need of comfort and healing—the Gospel writer presents Jesus as the “*Bread of Life*” for the Jesus community.

Only the bread of God that gives life to the world will ultimately satisfy the deepest human hunger.

John is saying to his readers that they must take Jesus’ life into their life.⁷

Think of it this way:

In her book, *Jesus Freak*, Sara Miles explains that “Jesus calls his disciples, giving us authority to *heal* and sending us out. He doesn’t show us *how* to reliably *cure* a molar pregnancy. He doesn’t show us how to make a blind man see,

³ Ibid., p. 95

⁴ Ibid., pp. 94, 95

⁵ Ibid., pp. 95, 96

⁶ John Shelby Spong, “*The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic,*” Harper One, New York, NY, 2013, pp. 16, 17

⁷ Ibid., p. 131

dry every tear, or even drive out all kinds of demons. *But he shows us how to enter a way of life in which the broken and sick pieces are held in love and given meaning. In which strangers literally touch each other, and in so doing make a community spacious enough for everyone.*⁸

Rachel Held Evans puts it this way: "... there is a difference between *curing* and *healing*, and I believe the church is called to the slow and difficult work of *healing*. We are called to enter one another's pain, anoint it as holy, and stick around no matter the outcome.

"The thing about healing (said Evans), as opposed to curing, is that it is *relational*. It takes time. It is inefficient, like a meandering river. Rarely does healing follow a straight or well-lit path. Rarely does it conform to our expectations or resolve in a timely manner. Walking with someone through grief, or through the process of reconciliation, requires patience, presence, and a willingness to wander, to take the scenic route."

But the modern-day church doesn't like to wander or wait. The modern-day church likes *results*. Convinced the gospel is a product we've got to *sell* to an increasingly shrinking *market*, we like our people to function as walking advertisements: *happy, put-together, finished—proof that this Jesus stuff WORKS!*

But if the world is watching, we might as well tell the truth (Evans concluded). And the truth is, the church doesn't offer a cure. It doesn't offer a quick fix. Rather, (as we see in today's text) the church offers *death and resurrection*. The church offers the messy, inconvenient, gut-wrenching, never-ending work of healing and reconciliation, the church offers *grace*.

Anything else we try to peddle is snake oil. It's not the real thing.⁹

As Brene' Brown puts it: "*I went to church thinking it would be like an epidural, that it would take the pain away ... But church isn't like an epidural; it's like a **midwife** ... I thought faith would say, 'I'll take away the pain and discomfort, but what it ended up saying was, 'I'll sit with you in it.'*"¹⁰

So where is God? There, as an adolescent child dies of old age. There, brokenhearted, as a child drowns. There, as the victims of terrorism perish in violent deaths. There, as Heather Heyer is struck down and killed by a car driven by a white racist in Charlottesville. There, as the messenger dies on a cross.

There's a lot of pain and suffering in the world—and the Divine is there.¹¹

Remember the Lord's Prayer specifically asks God to "*deliver us from evil*," but what that deliverance looks like depends on us. We need more than *individualistic deliverance* from pious notions of holiness. We also need an awareness of our complicity with the complex systems of the world and the evil and suffering they cause.¹²

So, our call as compassionate people of faith is to work toward overcoming evil and injustice in whatever forms they manifest themselves and to stand as witnesses to the presence of God. As we do all we can to facilitate healing and reconciliation, offering comfort in a hurting world, we become the embodiment of an answer to the to the question, *where is God when bad things happen?*¹³

That's how we offer bread to the world.

⁸ Sara Miles, *Jesus Freak: Feeding, Healing, Raising the Dead*, Josey-Bass, 2010, p, 105

⁹ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Learning, and Finding the Church*, Nelson Books, Nashville, TN, 2015, pp. 208, 209

¹⁰ "Brene' Brown: Jesus Wept," video, 6:00, *The Work of the People*, www.theworkofthepeople.com/Jesus - wept

¹¹ *Living the Questions*, p. 99 (modified)

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 100

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 99