

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
**“The People’s Choice: Job’s children as collateral damage-how can we square what happened to them
with our faith in a loving God?”**
Job 1: 1-5, 13-22
9th Sunday After Pentecost
August 6, 2017

In this next to last installment in our summer worship series “The People’s Choice,” based on suggestions that you submitted to the pastors, we arrive at this question: Job’s children—collateral damage for the greater good?

It occurs to me that perhaps a way of extending the question to our own day might be this: Does everything—even something as terrible as the death of one’s children—happen for a reason?

I will read Job 1: 1-5. I will then skip the section where Satan/the Accuser arrives on the scene. (Robert is going to be dealing with the subjects of Satan and hell next week although when we last spoke about his sermon, he hadn’t decided whether or not to deal directly with the Job story. Be sure to be here next week to hear what he will say...and pray for him in the meantime!) I will then pick up with verse 13.

A couple of weeks ago, a short time after the sermon that dealt with the story of Adam and Eve, referencing the musical *Hamilton* and the song “It’s Quiet Uptown” which gives voice to the pain of Alexander and Eliza Hamilton following the death of their 19-year-old son Philip, I received an email from someone who had attended the 9:45 service, asking for a link to the song which had been shone on the screen at that service.

The email read this way in part, “My nephew just lost one of his closest friends in a tragic rafting accident. I think of this young man’s parents as soon as I awake each day and as I’m falling asleep each night. Because of this recent tragedy, I had to go into a ‘zoning’ state during the video to avoid getting upset. I would love to watch it now at home.”

As I have prayed and studied and pondered what to say in today’s sermon, I have come to think of the writer of the email as a modern-day embodiment of the author of the Book of Job. I know the writer of the email to be a person of deep faith, as I am confident that the writer of the Book of Job, someone who lived 2500 years ago and whose name we will never know, was. What I so appreciated about the person’s email was the honest admission that in the face of the tragic, senseless death of a child, the first impulse of this faithful person was to turn away from the pain. I have a hunch that the author of Job was also a sensitive person in this vein, someone who had witnessed terrible and senseless tragedy such as the death of young adult children or perhaps had experienced this loss personally. But while the impulse to turn away was strong, this author, like the writer of the email, was willing to come back to the pain and to engage it honestly in order to seek to discern where and how God might be experienced in tragedy, pain, and suffering such as this.

The Book of Job is a long philosophical poem, 40 chapters in length, padded on either side by two and one-half chapters of prose prologue and epilogue, on the question of whether there is a greater good that is present in something as terrible as the death of children, as terrible as the diagnosis of a debilitating, terminal illness, as terrible as war or a natural disaster which destroys property and livelihoods and life itself for tens, for hundreds, for thousands of people.

There is a theological word for this question, perhaps the thorniest question in all of religion and one that has occupied theologians from the beginning of time. The word is *theodicy*—why a good God permits the manifestation of evil. When dealing with theodicy, it is important to remember that Job is only one book in the 66-volume library that is the Bible. Job alone cannot and does not answer the question, but when we take the Bible as a whole, I believe that there are at least three things which can be said about senseless tragedy and suffering.

The three things that can be said are these:

1. There is no consistent and ultimate biblical explanation about why bad things happen to people, be they good people or bad people in the eyes of whomever is making the judgment. The Bible never says, “Things happen for a reason...and this is the reason.”
2. In the midst of tragedy and suffering, we can turn to God. We can turn to God not for answers, but to be strengthened and comforted. (1)
3. In the midst of tragedy and suffering, we can be angry at what has happened; we can even view our anger as God’s own indignation at the world’s pain and injustice; and being so moved we can join our own efforts to God’s work to continue creating a world which moves toward that hoped-for day when, as the book of Revelation says, mourning and crying and pain are no more for they are now the former things which have all passed away.

As it happened, in the course of doing research for this sermon, I encountered a most amazing community of people who seem to me to be an embodiment, a demonstration, of all three things, and thus, I trust as good an answer as we are going to get in this life to questions of theodicy. It is an online community---blogs—of parents whose children have died. In preparing for this sermon, I spent several hours reading posts on a number of blogs, and frankly, the weight of their honesty, their compassion, their advocacy, their righteous anger, figuratively knocked me to the ground emotionally and spiritually and set a direction for the remainder of this sermon.

One parent writes for and curates a blog known as Still Standing. She has compiled a list of 6 Things that One Should Never Say to A Bereaved Parent. I offer them to you as someone who I will confess to you has said unthinkingly most of these things at one time or another.

(The following is a direct excerpt from the blog. In the sermon which I preached, I greatly condensed the material in the interest of time.)

So, here you go...6 things that one should never say to a bereaved parent:

“1) Time heals all wounds.

Last I checked in my journey of trekking through the unimaginable, time hasn't been working any overtime hours "healing" me. And even if on some far away planet time does heal all wounds, it doesn't make it helpful or comforting to hear when suffering in a ditch. Alone. Without much hope or a rope. Time can help soften and change some of the sharpness of grief, but time alone doesn't heal. Time + focused intention can create a current in the direction of healing, but triple underline this: Not all wounds heal, no matter how much time passes. Not every wound turns into a scar. Not all suffering ends in this lifetime. Yes, in time it might scab over, but the slightest bump or scratch can make it start to bleed all over again. Ask any bereaved parent— he or she will tell you— child loss is a wound that won't ever completely heal. No matter how much time or good intention, living a life without one (or more) of your children is a wound that forever bleeds. No matter how many band-aids cover it over time.

Try instead: What would feel healing/helpful to you right now? ~ Is there any way I can help carry your burden? ~ What do you need most today? ~ I am with you. Always.

2) Let go... Move on. You'd feel better if you let go/move on... You're hanging onto him too much, that's why you're so sad... If you'd just let go you could start living again... Anything that implies "get over it" will only add more unnecessary pain and hurt to a bereaved parents' already gaping, oozing wounds. What on earth is left for grieving parents to "let go of" when they've already lost the most precious treasure of their entire life to death? We've already been forced to let go of someone who we would've given our own life to keep. The only thing we have left to hold onto is our child's memory and our abiding love for him or her. And in doing so we courageously move forward, but never do we move on. Moving on implies not taking our child with us throughout the rest of our lives. When someone tells me I need to "move on/let go", I tell them to move on from my life because I will proudly carry my son with me everywhere I go. If people have a problem with it, I have no problem letting them go.

Try instead: Hold on to me. I'll walk with you every step of the way. ~ No matter how painful, I'll be with you every breath you take apart from your child. ~ Tell me about your beautiful child. What was he like? What do you miss the most?

3) Have faith. If you'd just have faith, this wouldn't hurt so badly... If you had a strong faith like I do, you wouldn't still be grieving like this... If you'd just trust God you wouldn't be suffering so much... Guess what? Grief is not indicative of a lack of faith. Ever. So stop playing the faith card in an attempt to comfort someone who is suffering the worst human pain IMAGINABLE. Having faith doesn't make the fact that our child was robbed from us far before her time any easier or more bearable. And it certainly doesn't make it hurt any less, or make us feel more supported. All it does is make it more probable that someone might feel like punching you in the face. Furthermore, it shames a bereaved parent into thinking— Wow, if only I had more faith I wouldn't hurt so much. What am I doing wrong?— which I hope is the exact opposite message you're intending to send. Bereaved parents already feel isolated and alone in a world that predominately doesn't understand child loss, and judging a grieving person's level of faith by their depth of grief is not only ludicrous, it's downright cruel. Just don't.

Try instead: I love you. ~ What is it like to keep living without your child?

4) Everything happens for a reason.

No. It doesn't. Sometimes the most horrible, cruel, unimaginably awful things happen to the best, most amazing, incredibly loving people on the planet. And guess what? Sometimes life just plain doesn't make sense. Sometimes things happen for no logical reason at all. Saying "everything happens for a reason" is possibly the fastest way to make a grieving parents' blood boil. There is no reason good

enough in all of heaven and earth that my son is buried underground while my feet continue to walk the earth.

I get that most people say this in an attempt to make sense of what is senseless, but instead let's just state what is true: It makes no *bleepin'* sense at all. Children should never, ever die before their parents. We all want the world to feel safe and predictable, and the word childloss is the quickest way to shake the foundation of those closest to us. The thought of it is downright terrifying. It pops even the most carefully crafted safety bubbles.

The truth is, witnessing the suffering of others might crack you open—possibly wide open. Let it. It's supposed to. It's in the cracking that our hearts can offer empathy and true support instead of false platitudes, unwelcome advice or a severed relationship that offers no comfort to your hurting loved one.

Try instead: I'm so sorry. It's just not fair. ~ There's no good reason this happened. You don't deserve this pain. I wish I could take it away from you. ~ It breaks my heart to see you suffering. ~ I'm so sorry.

5). At Least.

Any sentence starting with at least should never be spoken to a bereaved parent. Never. Ever. "At least she didn't suffer... At least he died young... (?!?!!) ... At least you can have more children... At least you got as long as you did with her... At least it was quick and painless... At least you were blessed to have him at all." There is no at least in childloss. None. If you want to support your loved one in the best way possible, keep "at least" out of your conversations with her.

Try instead: I miss him too. I wish he was here with us. ~ What's your favorite memory of her? ~ What helps you feel closest to him when you miss him the most?

6). Be thankful. Be thankful you can have more children (newsflash: not everyone can!) ... Be thankful for your living children... Be thankful you had her at all.

Telling someone who has lost more than you can ever imagine to be thankful, is like slapping her in the face instead of hugging her. Seriously. Don't do it. You better believe any bereaved parent in the world could school you in the art of being thankful. There's no need to lecture us on the topic. We're thankful more than thankful has ever been thanked. We're grateful for each precious moment we were blessed to have our child, and this gratitude for every single blessed moment is what keeps our heart beating. And if we do have other living children you better believe we're thankful to the nth degree for the children we still have, but that doesn't take away the lifelong pain of living without one (or more) of our precious children.

Try instead: I'm thankful for you. ~ I'm thankful for your child. ~ I'm thankful for our friendship. ~ I'm thankful to witness your courage and bravery and strength. (2)

These are the 6 things that one should never say and the things that one might say to bereaved parents.

I will add one more from my own experience, not the unimaginable experience of having lost a child myself, but the experience of being granted the privilege, the frighteningly holy experience of leading several funerals and memorial services for children and young people who have died.

One of those experiences for me was for a three-year-old who darted into the street and was hit by an automobile. I had never met the little girl. I had never met the parents. The parents lived in the

St. Louis neighborhood where the church I was serving at the time was located, and they just showed up in my office red-eyed and in shock. I recall how inadequate I felt to lead the service, how much I struggled to find the right words to say, how guilty I felt that my own son—only a few years older than this little girl was at that very moment romping merrily on the playground, very much alive, how as the service ended, I felt that I had failed this precious child, this grieving family, every person who was present in the sanctuary where silence and sadness made even it difficult for anyone there to breathe.

After the service, a woman, a young mother about my age at the time, stuck her head into the open door of my office. She had been crying, and she told me that she had come as a member of Compassionate Friends, a network of support groups for families whose children have died. She told me that she wanted to tell me something. I drew in my breath and steeled myself, because I just knew that she was going to tell me that I had said precisely the wrong thing and added to the pain of the family. I braced myself for what was sure to hurt but also to teach.

This is what she said: I just want to say that when my child died, someone said to me that when a child dies, we are called to remember that God knows what it is lose a child to death too. It was something that I had never thought about. It didn't take away the pain, but it made me know that I am not alone in my grief. And I just wanted to say thank you for saying that in the service today...for this family and for me.

She was only one person, but I took her words to heart. And now, as we come to the Table where we remember Jesus's "saving death," I pass her words on to you in the event that the unimaginable happens to you or to someone you love.

1. Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Anchor, 1981), 36-52.
2. <http://stillstandingmag.com/2014/01/6-things-never-say-bereaved-parent/>