“The First Heart Broken”

A Sermon preached by Margaret Wallin

At First Congregational Church Gaylord

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This morning we begin a new sermon series with the main title of “Why?” It is based at least in part on the book authored by Adam Hamilton: Why? Making Sense of God’s Will. The emphasis for this morning applies the question to innocent suffering. Easy Peasy, right? One sermon ought to be sufficient to explain the why of suffering, right? I am thinking not so much. But that fact need not daunt us, or prevent us from looking at the problem of suffering, and what light our faith may be able to shed upon the issue. Just please don’t expect a definitive, all inclusive, easy to hold onto reason for all the suffering that occurs in the world.

There is of course, no lack of examples of suffering in our world. It has been ever so. Scholars generally agree that The Book of Job was written between the 7th and 4th centuries BCE. So, even a half millennia before Christ was born, the problem of suffering was one that plagued the people. It is particularly human to want a reason, to believe that if we just understood how this particular calamity we are enduring occurred, we could deal with it, and perhaps avoid suffering ourselves. Sometimes we go so far as to make up the answer to the question Why – sometimes to provide what we think will comfort another, or to regain some sense of control.

The story is told about the great preacher William Sloane Coffin, who preached his most memorable sermon right after his son Alex died in a car accident in which his vehicle plummeted into Boston Harbor and Alex drowned. In that sermon, Coffin said:

When a person dies, there are many things that can be said, and at least one thing that should never be said. The night after Alex died, a woman came by carrying quiches. She shook her head, saying sadly, “I just don’t understand the will of God.”
     Instantly I swarmed all over her. “I’ll say you don’t, lady! Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper, that he was probably driving too fast in a storm? Do you think it is God’s will that there are no streetlights along that stretch of road?”

     Fresh from his loss, Coffin admitted:

Nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn’t go around with his finger on triggers, his fist around knives, his hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against **all** unnatural deaths. The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, “It is the will of God.” My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break.
     Where was God when Alex drowned? Or for that matter where was God in 9/11? It’s the sort of question we tend to ask when trouble knocks on our door and it’s our turn to be in torment. Sometimes we ask Why? But isn’t it interesting that we more often ask Where?

     Behind the “Where was God?” question is the horrible thought that maybe wherever God may be, God is somewhere, but far removed from here. Here we are, down here with our occasional troubles and miseries – which for some people among us are constant and unrelenting – and then there is God up there somewhere over the rainbow playing cards or engaged in some divine playtime activity.
     You have heard William Sloane Coffin’s reply to the Where is God question: “When the waves closed over the sinking car, God’s heart was the first of all our hearts to break.” Is this consolation enough? It seems to have been adequate for this grieving father. God is love, but God also gives a wide berth for us to act freely down here, even when we stumble. But that same God doesn’t stop loving us any more than earthly fathers stop loving their sons or daughters when they are hurt by going astray from the parent’s desire.

Hamilton notes that humans become disappointed with God in the face of suffering or tragedy or injustice, but it is disappointment stemming from our assumptions about how God is *supposed*  to work in the world. When God does not follow **our** ideas of how God’s work is to be done, he says: “we are disappointed, disillusioned and confused.” His resolution to the problem is to challenge some of our commonly held assumptions. The first one being that if I am a good person and try to do the right things, God will protect me and keep me safe from all harm. Those steeped in the Christian tradition may even believe that the Bible teaches this as truth. The corollary then would be, if something bad happens to me, I must have done something wrong – like the young man I talked about last month, who suffered from a debilitating disease that had crushed his dreams of an Olympic career. There is this assumption that the suffering person somehow deserves this suffering, it is a divine punishment for wrong doing or lack of faith or . . . we don’t know what.

Throughout the biblical witness, both Hebrew Bible and New Testament, it is clear that people naturally assumed that when a person suffered, they had done something to deserve it. The friends that come to sit with Job, urge him to admit his sin and repent so that he can be relieved of his suffering. Yet we know from the reading this morning that Job was blameless in the sight of God. Job does not admit to wrongdoing and feels that his affliction is unjust. Rather he challenges God – demands that God demonstrate how justice is being done to him, to show him what wrong he has committed that he should suffer these losses. God sees, hears, shows up face to face and responds essentially that Job is in no position to know or understand the complexities of creating and sustaining a universe. And so, the story does not provide a definitive answer to the question “Why?”. Rather, it instructs us that people often suffer for reasons that they do not understand, that God may permit it, but it is not necessarily consistent with God’s will that anyone should suffer.

Or take the second reading in which we learn that some Galileans were offering sacrifices and worshiping, when Pilate's hoodlums came and slaughtered them, mixing their blood with the sacrifices that the Galileans had offered to God. The disciples want to know what Jesus says about that. Jesus, guessing that they are wanting to know whether the victims were being punished as sinners, responds: "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way that there were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you” and then urges them to repent, to change their outlook.

Careful study of the Bible does not in fact support the supposition that we only get what we deserve. The Bible does not say Good righteous people don’t suffer – rather, as Hamilton points out, the Bible over and over again describes people who refused to let go of their faith in the face of their suffering. Suffering is an often unavoidable truth in life. Our power, our freedom lies in our choice of how to respond.

There are many, many examples Hamilton lifts up – among them, Joseph, son of Jacob, sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, eventually winding up in Egypt. Moses, who despite his doing God’s will, is often miserable, so much so that he sometimes prays for God to kill him. Jeremiah, God’s prophet, often asks to die. And of course there is Job.

 The greatest example offered in the New Testament concerns the suffering of the very Son of God, who has done all that was asked of him, declined all temptations to stray from God’s plan, yet suffers torture before an ignominious death on a cross. The biblical witness is NOT that those who are perfectly obedient never suffer, rather it is a witness that one can trust in God despite our suffering, and can receive comfort in the midst of that suffering.

So, is there more that can be said about suffering?

William Willimon says that, for us, “the challenge is to affirm that God does not cause wrecks or sickness and yet **not** to say that God is not responsible. God created this world, this world which is sometimes so hard a place for so many. What kind of responsibility does **love** normally assume?”

     We are not God’s puppets; that is not how God created us. Rather, God has gifted us with some degree of choice and free will. We creatures are finite and mortal; when we hurt, we weep. When the pain is great, we say our hearts are breaking. When the wound is severe, it can even be felt physically – a gaping hole in the chest, sucking the wind out of us. We pretty quickly learn that loving means risking pain and loss. That potential for pain has led some in our culture to adopt the attitude that we should avoid loving **anything**, much less any**one**, in order to avoid the risk and pain of loss. But that would create a pain of a different kind and is not a good answer.

So, we know that when we say “God loves” we are claiming that God assumes all the risk that loving involves. God risks loving us and therefore must weep over our losses, because those losses are God’s too – they are losses for those he loves. We can understand that at an instinctual level. We feel the pain of loss for our children, grandchildren, or others whom we love when we see that their hopes are dashed, when they become ill, when their marriages fail, or when they incur any significant loss. We see their pain, and our hearts bleed for them. That is the compassion that God gifted us with along with our ability to love. That gift, that capacity, is part of what demonstrates that we are created in the image of God.
     I think that Coffin was right to say that God grieved at the loss of his son Alex. But Coffin said more and I think more can said about this matter of our suffering and God’s love in the Job text. Where was God when Alex died? Well, where was God when Alex was born? Where was God each step of Alex’s life? The answer to all these questions is the same. God was **there**, with Alex, present in love. God was there to hear the borning cry as the wonderful baptismal hymn says, and we affirm that God is there throughout life and abides with us at the hour of our death, when we believe we will be welcomed home into the heart of God, into the presence of Jesus.

Deep, abiding love – the kind of love God has for creatures – that love is noted for its **presence** – its consistent connection of the lover with the beloved. The psalmist asks “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” (Ps 139:7). Where is God? Here. Particularly, in our times of misery and pain, God is here.
     Willimon asks how we can know that God is here? What do we base that knowledge on? He says: “If the greatest of minds have pondered the ‘Why, God?’and have come up short, how could we know this?”

And he answers that question by saying: “We know it through Gospel stories like the one today where Jesus enters into human life, showing up at worship where people bring their burdens and confusion and cares. We know it through our own experience.” Perhaps you have experienced God’s presence and care in a time of suffering either here or in other places of solitude or corporate worship. You came to that place, perhaps silently shouting at Jesus or God because of some tragedy in your life, only to have him shout back, “I love you still.” Where is God? Here. Now. There. With you.

  We can begin to know God’s heart because of Jesus. Look at the story of Jesus and the death of Lazarus. Jesus learned of the death of his friend Lazarus and what did he do? “Jesus began to weep” (Jn 11:35). Jesus wept over Jerusalem, he pitied Peter and even when it came down to it, he pitied the wicked Pontius Pilate. Rather than lash out at those who crucified him, Jesus’ heart broke. He died a human death, as you and I die – or worse. Innocent of wrongdoing, following God’s will for his life, those who exercised their free will by siding with evil, crucified him. Jesus died, not for his own benefit, but out of love for us, and out of love and honor for God. Jesus died to honor his purpose and his call to reconcile the world to God. That’s who God is. That’s where God is. God comes to us in Jesus, loves, heals, teaches, preaches, and then sacrifices himself all for the love of the created beings – including us.
     Christianity believes that in Christ, God takes evil and suffering on God’s own self on the cross. Suffering is real. It happens to everyone – some more than others. God doesn’t cause suffering. We believe rather that God bears it. God risks a broken heart, and obtains a victory that is God’s resurrection – a victory that isn’t complete until the end of time when every tear shall be wiped away and God gets what God wants for the beloved, including you and me.
     Even the pain of abandonment is felt by our Christ. Where is God? Jesus cries out “My God my God, why have you forsaken me?” Please note that Jesus calls God “my God.” God is not remote, up there in the hour of Jesus’ excruciating suffering. God is there, close and caring, daring to intrude into our pain, taking our shouts and cries and embracing us still in love and compassionate forgiveness.

  When we or someone we love suffers, we often want to get out of it and away from it as soon as we can. It can be so difficult to see someone your care about in pain, or to be in pain yourself. And we can feel helpless to do anything about the cause of the pain. Often, we **are** helpless to fix the cause. And we don’t like feeling helpless. But Jesus shows us that God is different from us in that God seems to seek out the suffering. God tends to wade into the suffering of others and offer comfort, love, solace, and the knowledge that we are visited by one who knows suffering at an intimate level. God will also send people into our lives who provide divine presence with skin on for us, who are willing to witness our pain and witness to the fact of God’s continuing love

We can hear that as very good news indeed. For it means that, when we suffer, we are apt to be very close to the suffering God. When we cry out, “My God, why?” we can remember the cross, and know that it’s there, right there, God is with us here and now. It is God who has the first heart broken.

     Where is God? Willimon says “Where there are crosses, there is God. God didn’t stay trapped in heavenly glory but rather came and confronted and squared off with the worst evil the world could give. For us. With us. Thanks be to God.”

To that the people of God may well say Amen, and Amen.