

Chuck Blaisdell, Sr. Pastor
First Christian Church
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“I Am Not Sure About A God....” 4. Who Does Things That Seem to Be Evil

Genesis 50:15-20a Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good."

3 John 1:11 Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.

Romans 8:28 We know that in all things God works together with those who love him to bring about what is good with those who have been called according to his purpose.

It's one of the more poignant stories told in the gospels. Jesus and the disciples are walking one day and they come upon a man who was blind from birth (John 9). Now, we don't know how they knew he had been born blind; the story just asserts it rather than explains it. And one of the disciples matter-of-factly asks Jesus "“Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” You wonder, though, how a man who was **born** blind could have somehow caused through his own actions his lack of sight. There wouldn't seem to be a great deal of opportunity for sin while in utero. But that strange part of the question is not really the poignant part; no, the poignancy comes from the fact that we have all been there, we have all wondered similar things in the middle of the night, we have all somehow assumed that our bad actions caused something which our rational minds know is not the case. “What did I do to cause this?” is the plaintive cry of a parent who would give anything, even life itself, if his or her child had not had to deal with something terrible.

But Jesus' answer to his disciples' question seems troubling on the face of it.

This is how he responds: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” And, I don’t know about you, but on first blush that answer leaves me cold, and leaves me wondering about God and whether, as the title of this sermon has it, God does evil? When we wonder such things, we are not alone. In fact, some scholars have said that religion itself arose in all its various ways in places all around the world to answer the twin questions, “How do you explain evil?” and “Why do people suffer who do not deserve it?” And those various religions have answered that question in a variety of ways. Let’s remind ourselves of a few of those:

One response to those questions, found in some forms of Buddhism, is that evil is only an illusion. In this form of Buddhism, it is claimed that what we see as evil is actually a mistake based on the fact that we are not really individuals but our highest essence is to move towards becoming one with the world in a way that does away with the self. If there is no self, there can be no suffering, no evil. The fact that we do seem to suffer evil is due to the fact that we are insufficiently enlightened and continue to want to cling to our belief that we are individuals rather than simply part of a cosmic whole.

In some forms of Hinduism and in other forms of Buddhism, the reason for undeserved suffering and evil is to in fact deny that it is undeserved. This is the notion of “karma,” that what happens to you is always a direct result somehow of something that you have done. It would be as if Jesus had answered his disciples’ question about who sinned with “I don’t know but to be sure somebody sinned to cause the man’s blindness.” Now, to be sure, sometimes we act like we want to believe in karma because it means that we are in control of our life. And who wouldn’t like that! But I also suspect, though, that we would not like the notion that goes along with karma in these forms of Hinduism and Buddhism, that of an almost endless cycle of re-birth and

the re-born individual has the chance in the next reincarnation to sin just a little less than previously.

Over the ages, Christians, too, have sought to answer this difficult question of evil and undeserved suffering. The classic orthodox answer, of course, is that somehow evil was transmitted to every human being because of Adam's choice to disobey God in the Garden of Eden and therefore no child can be born who is not already tainted by this "original sin." Another classical Christian response is simply to claim that there is actually no evil because we don't know enough about God's greater plan and if we were but able to see the big picture we would realize that things that we think are evil are really good.

That, of course, is only a small smattering of the kinds of responses, both Christian and otherwise, that have been offered to the questions of why there is evil and undeserved suffering. And here is what I want to say: *none of them are satisfactory answers*. There may be those people who find it comforting and acceptable to live with the answer that suffering is somehow an illusion and is not really real, but I am not one of them and I suspect no one in this room is either. That would also mean that God has created our existence to be some sort of elaborate joke or hoax where we only think we truly matter as individuals and so our pain at our own or others' undeserved suffering is unwarranted. But I can't go there because that makes God into a kind of monster, toying with humanity.

Nor do I find convincing the belief that the reason that we suffer is that we somehow in some way deserve it and none of it matters, really, because we will be reincarnated into another of an endless series of lives with some vanishingly tiny prospect of escaping this cycle sometime in the infinite future. This too would seem to make God into yet another kind of trickster who allows us the illusion that this life that we are living is truly valuable and irreplaceable and therefore what we do matters.

But most troubling of all, it seems to me, is the whole notion of “original sin” that says that because of a long-ago supposed ancestor and his disobedience, every evil that comes our way is in fact deserved. There are so, so many things wrong with that point of view that it would be hard to address them all in one sermon, but let’s try. First of all, this notion of original sin uses a biological or medical model to try to explain something that is most assuredly not biological or medical. There is no virus or bacteria that can be identified as “the original sin germ.” To purport to use a scientific mechanism to explain the fact that evil happens is simply pseudo-science and is one of those things that gives Christians a bad name. Secondly, even if we dispense with the pseudo-medical or biological stuff, and we grant the poetic point behind the story – which is that human actions sometimes have bad and even evil consequences – that explains nothing about natural evil. Earthquakes and tsunamis are not caused by the implications of individual human decisions.

Most importantly, though, I want you think through with me the implications for the understanding of God if somehow this idea of “original sin” is in fact true and can be cited as the reason people suffer and that evil exists. What it means is that every apparently undeserved evil that happens is in fact deserved, that somehow what you did caused tragedy to befall you or someone you care about. Which means that God set things up that way. It also leads to such awful statements that we all have heard like “God wanted your child in heaven more than you needed him on earth” or “God never gives you more than you can handle.” I will never forget the response of a grieving parent whose baby had died of SIDS to whom a well-meaning friend had said just those words; she tearfully said “I so wish that I had been a weaker person, then, so God wouldn’t have done this.”

Let me say it this way: if we go down this road we have to come to the conclusion that the answer to our sermon’s title question this morning is “Yes, God does

do evil.” In fact, to recur back to the scripture I opened with, Jesus’ answer itself may give that impression: “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” What sort of answer is this? Skeptics of Christianity might claim that any God who would decide to inflict pain and suffering on someone in order to show off is indeed a God who does evil and is not worthy of worship – worthy of placating, maybe, worthy of trying to keep out of His sight, perhaps, but worthy of praise and adoration? It just doesn’t seem so.

How might we respond to this? How might we understand that troubling line on Jesus’ lips? I think we do so by keeping two things in mind. First of all, as I have said before, this world was truly created by God in such a way that not only do you and I have free will and a degree of true power, but in some sense every element of creation does. I believe that you and I truly do have power to choose this and not that and to do this and not that. When we choose stupid or hurtful ways of behaving, whether to ourselves or others, God does not stop us. We truly do have the power to make such choices. Otherwise, it is all a sham and God is simply a puppet master who created us to think we have free will but we really don’t. Yet, all of creation also has power even if sometimes in the tiniest of ways. Why was the man born blind? We don’t know physiologically speaking. But we do know that there was a cause, perhaps a virus exercised its power at a vulnerable point in utero. Perhaps a DNA strand went its own way. We don’t know. But what we do know is that a creation where you and I and everything has some degree of true power means that we are privileged to experience depths of incredible beauty, we are privileged to know the joys of having bodies that can taste and see and sing and love (although I do confess, after several medical visits this past month that bodies came with extended warranties), but it also means that we can also be subject to the vagaries and vicissitudes of bodies whose parts break down or become infected or stop working like they were meant to. Does

God decide to send blindness or hurt or pain? No. But those things are ever a possibility in a world that God truly made free.

Second, I think we understand Jesus' line "he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him" not as a bullying God seeking to show off, but in the same way we ought to understand our third scripture for this morning when it says "in all things God works together with those who love him to bring about what is good...." Note that this does NOT say that God causes all things, but it does say that when evil and undeserved suffering come, God is never absent, God continues to work in and through us to bring the good that is possible. So, instead of saying "God never gives you more than you can handle" – which presumes that God indeed causes evil – we can instead say "God is always with you no matter what you have to handle." And God is always seeking to bring good even out of evil and hurt and pain.

Thousands of years ago, our forefather in the faith, Joseph, learned this. Perhaps you recall the story. Joseph was the last-born of Jacob, the baby of the family, his father's favorite. His father doted on him to the point of buying him a beautiful coat of many colors that was totally impractical for working in. Joseph's brothers resented him and made a terrible decision: to sell Joseph into slavery to a passing band of Egyptians and to tell their father he was dead. And so they did, and Joseph was carried in chains to Egypt where a government official named Potiphar bought him. To make a long story short, in Potiphar's household, for the very first in his life something was asked of Joseph; he was not just the over-spoiled golden child. Potiphar gave him responsibilities and expected Joseph to carry out his duties well and faithfully. And Joseph began to flourish in ways he likely never would have if had stayed the pampered paternal pet. In fact, he was so effective he rose to be the head of Potiphar's household. Everything was going wonderfully for him, but then Potiphar's wife made up a serious charge against him. As a result, Joseph was taken out of Potiphar's

household and put into prison. While in prison, Joseph became known as a skilled interpreter of dreams. When the Pharaoh was troubled by nightmares, someone remembered the young Hebrew in the jail. He was taken to Pharaoh and Joseph was able to help him understand that his dreams were saying that though the land was having times of wonderful abundance, Pharaoh needed to hold some of that abundance in reserve because a horrible famine was coming. Pharaoh was so impressed with Joseph that he let him out of prison and made him his Chief of Staff. And Joseph was able to store up enough of the affluence of that bountiful time that when the famine did come, Egypt became the bread basket of the Mediterranean basin. Meanwhile, Joseph's brothers and father are starving in their native land, and they finally come to Egypt to seek food and help. At the end of the story, they come to Joseph and apologize to him for all they had done. He said, *"Look, do not weep. You meant what you did for evil. That cannot be denied. But God used it for good."*

One pastor comments on this story this way; listen to his words:

In the story of Joseph, we are assured that even the most blind, most cruel events have the potential to lead us to deeper springs of living water. How? We [learn] that God does not will hardship upon us, but God is with us through our hardship.... Whatever happens, God abides.

Always, always, God abides.

Not long before his death at the age of 90, former English Prime Minister Winston Churchill was asked to give a commencement address. He had to be helped to the podium. He then hesitated so long that folks began to wonder if he was alright. Finally, he raised his head – that face whose force of will and eloquence had literally kept England alive during the worst of the Battle of Britain – and looked at those graduates and said this: ***"Never, never, never give up."*** And then he turned and sat down. It is likely the only commencement address in human history still remembered word-for-word by those who were there. And while his was an exhortation to those

graduates just beginning their lives, it could also serve as an oh-so-fitting description of God. Does our God do evil? No. But does our God ever, ever, ever give up journeying with us and seeking to bring good out of hurt and pain and evil?

No, no, no. Thanks be to God, no!