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My Favorite Things (to preach on): 1. Pain – God’s Megaphone - 9.20.9

Romans 8:28 says: **And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.**

That Scripture, one of my favorites, is as clear a statement of faith as there is in Scripture. By that, I mean it’s an easy verse to doubt, and it’s not natural to believe, so you have to have faith to accept it. In all things, God works for the good of those who love him? In cancer and Crohn’s disease and ALS? In bankruptcy and heartache and betrayal? The Scripture says “yes”, in all things.

Notice what this passage doesn’t say. It doesn’t say that “God causes all things”. It doesn’t say that “everything happens for a reason” which is a commonly held belief, but it does say that God can make a reason out of anything. In *The Lord of the Rings*, when Gandalf comes back to life after falling into the pit, Sam says: “Is everything bad going to come untrue?” In a sense, **Romans 8:28** is about God making bad things come untrue, or as Joseph said to his brothers: “You meant it for evil. God meant it for good” (from **Genesis 50:20**).

Romans 8:28 is in many ways God’s definitive word on pain. Suffering may be caused by someone else’s sin, or by my own, or by causes untraceable to any human fault, but God can untwist it and use it for my good and yours. That’s a statement of faith, and it’s the one we need as we begin this new series. As the bulletin cover says, I’m preaching on my favorite things, and the first of my favorites is pain. ☺ Sick, right? But I don’t like to experience it; I don’t like to inflict it on others; I just like to preach about it! Seriously, though pain can be a stumbling block that trips people up on their way to God, pain is also a subject that has inspired some thought-provoking study from writers like Phillip Yancey and C. S. Lewis and the Bible speaks eloquently about suffering even though it doesn’t finally give us the neat and tidy answers to it we might want. So today and next Sunday we’re going to study the problem of pain.

Let me begin with this statement, a description of what we call the problem of pain:

The world contains so much evil, appalling injustice, and meaningless suffering.

To expand: People treat other people horribly. Murder, genocide, scams that rob the elderly of their last dollar, sudden and tragic death. A tsunami kills a quarter of a million people in a few minutes in 2004. Anarchy takes over New Orleans in 2005. A sudden car crash takes the life of an eighteen year old. A car-jacking is followed by torture and murder. A car bomb explodes, killing 15 people somewhere (and this is so common it hardly makes the news).

People deserve better than this. They ought to be treated better, by each other and by the things we call nature and chance. It isn’t right that so many bad things happen all the time. Sure, there are good things to be thankful for, but even those things are often described in terms of evil avoided: “I’m thankful to have food, because millions are starving, and there doesn’t seem to be a thing anyone can do about it”.

That’s the problem of evil, the problem of pain, and those facts lead many folks to say that God, or at least the God of the Bible is a myth. A God who is both good and powerful would not let

such a state of affairs continue. If there is a god, he either isn't good enough to care, or he isn't mighty enough to save, or maybe he just isn't there at all.

You have probably struggled with the problem of pain and injustice. If you haven't, you should and you probably will. They are real questions, after all, part of real life, and the process of claiming faith as your own usually involves wrestling with pain and suffering in light of God. The **Psalms** record people crying out about these things. The book of **Job** is a record of passionate discussion about these things. The Old Testament prophets cry out to God about these things too.

Let's look at some of the assumptions that stand behind the problem of pain, the idea that the world contains too much evil and appalling injustice and pointless suffering to allow for a good and powerful God.

Assumption 1: There is a standard of justice, of right and wrong, that almost everyone can recognize. Namely, people SHOULD treat each other fairly. They shouldn't kill or steal or rape or kidnap or lie about each other for profit, or jump onstage during the Video Music Awards while Taylor Swift is trying to talk! Not only that, but the natural world OUGHT to treat people fairly too. It isn't right that a tsunami should kill so many people, nor should an earthquake or a hurricane or a sudden tornado. We're not in charge of such things, though, but if God is, then (people say) he should be kinder than that. We KNOW all of this because we assume that there is such a thing as right and wrong, such a thing as good and evil, such a thing as justice.

Okay, so where did that standard of right and wrong come from? What makes us think that it should be so obvious that people should treat each other better, and that genocide is wrong and that the young shouldn't be snuffed out and that we should all be able to live as long as our Congressional Death Panel says? ☺

It's common for preachers to say that morality has all but disappeared. That's not true. We are surrounded by moral outrage these days. The sins have changed. It's not who you sleep with or what pictures you look at anymore, but people are outraged about carbon footprints, cap-and-trade, cyber-bullying, government bailouts, infringement on free speech, water boarding, Intelligent Design, swine flu vaccination, factory farms and the President speaking to school children. We may have more moral outrage whirling around us than any generation in history! So how did we get so morally-minded? How did we get it into our heads that there is Justice and Decency and Right and Wrong?

If you happen to be a committed naturalist – that's not someone who lives in the woods and eats tree bark, but rather someone who believes that everything developed accidentally through natural processes – there is no firm foundation upon which to stack the blocks of justice, morality, right and wrong. On the contrary, naturalism says that life developed BECAUSE of the brutal elimination of the weak. If the dinosaurs hadn't been killed off, perhaps by a giant meteor and climate change, we wouldn't be here. It probably didn't seem fair to them, but it worked out well for us. Things happen, species go extinct, and people die. It's the way of the world. Animals eat each other. Nature is red in tooth and claw. The weak don't survive. It's not about morality justice or right and wrong. It's just the way it is.

Ever hear of Richard Dawkins? He's not the guy who played for the Sixers back in the 70s, the guy who smashed all those backboards. That's Darryl Dawkins! Richard Dawkins is an evolutionary biologist and a combative atheist who wrote the 2006 book *The God Delusion*. In his articles, he comes off as mean-spirited (a moral judgment, I know) but I heard him interviewed on a public radio show called Radio Lab where he seemed a little more charming (another moral judgment) possibly due to his British accent. In the interview, he acknowledged that his naturalism provided no basis for morality, but he said that we can choose to live differently, and that he chooses to not live a lifestyle of survival of the fittest in the way he treats others and in his politics.

Well that's fine for him, but not for everyone. He finds it good to choose to be a decent person, but the kid in the inner city who can't see any legitimate way out might find it better to choose to be a gangster, or choose to murder and steal for a living. Is morality really just a matter of preference? Some say we should choose to pursue justice and acknowledge right and wrong because it's good for all of us. We should be kind to the weak and help them simply because we might someday be weak and would want people to help us, and that's good for the human species. They say it gives our species an evolutionary advantage that we look out for each other. I'm not so sure that's true. Some people think that the best thing that could happen to our species is for a couple billion of us to die off in a plague – thin the herd, strengthen the gene pool by eliminating the weak. Who is to say that THIS is wrong?

The fact is, nearly everybody says it's wrong. We shouldn't kill off the weak, we shouldn't let people starve or die of treatable disease, and we shouldn't let cruelty and theft and abuse go unpunished. Why not? Because it would be wrong. There IS some standard beyond nature that we cannot explain away, and we are OBLIGED to acknowledge it whether we want to or not. It's not just personal preference, as in "I prefer that people don't suffer, even people that aren't me!" This is higher than that. Where does it come from?

Our answer is that it comes from **Romans 1** where Paul, speaking about God judging the wicked, says: **¹⁸The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.** The Bible says that it's no accident that we believe in right and wrong. He made us that way. It's part of the meaning behind the powerful statement in **Genesis**, "Let us make man in our own image". It's part of the meaning behind the statement in **Ecclesiastes 3:11** that says God has placed eternity in our hearts. So we believe in justice and right and wrong because it is in our created nature to do so. In that sense, when people say that the world is horribly unjust and cruel, or that people are wicked to one another, they are unconsciously giving evidence of a just and moral God, whose invisible qualities are understood from what has been made.

Back to the problem of pain:

The world contains so much evil, appalling injustice, and meaningless suffering.

Assumption 1: There is a standard of justice, of right and wrong, that almost everyone can recognize.

Assumption 2: If there is meaning in suffering, I should be able to see it. That's a point of view that crops up a lot in the Bible. In the book of **Job**, for example, all of the humans who take part in the extended discussion think that if suffering has meaning, it should be knowable. Job's friends think this, and they think they know the meaning too: Obviously, Job has sinned, they say, or else he wouldn't be hurting. Job's wife thinks suffering should have meaning, and I guess you could say that she doesn't see the meaning, so she tells Job to give up on God. "Curse God and die!" Even Job thinks that he should be able to discern the meaning of his suffering, and the fact that he cannot discern it causes him to try to plead his case before God.

At the end of the book of Job, God steps in and overturns this assumption that if suffering means something, we should be able to know what it is. God gives Job a message that is very poetic and beautiful, but not very warm and nice. The message is: "Who are you to question me? Do you know what I know? Can you see what I see? Have you made what I've made?" That's about it! Now, WE know that Job's suffering had meaning on a cosmic level; it was a matter of

spiritual warfare in the heavenly realms. But JOB doesn't know that and God doesn't tell him either. But we still discuss his story today because his suffering had meaning, even if he couldn't see it.

My favorite Bible story is the one about Joseph, in **Genesis**. A favorite son of Jacob, given dreams by God, maybe a little arrogant in his youth...his brothers hated him and even thought about killing him, but then they sold him into slavery. He was dragged from his home and family and taken to Egypt where he became a slave. "Joseph, what's the meaning of it all?" "I have no idea. I guess we just live in a cruel world."

Joseph actually did well as a slave, and soon found himself in charge of the household of a high official, but when he wouldn't sleep with the boss's wife, she turned on him and accused him of violating her, so he was thrown in prison for his purity. "Joseph, what's the meaning of it all?" "I have no idea. I don't think there is any meaning. I guess we just live in a cruel world."

Joseph actually did well in prison, and pretty soon he was in charge of the prison, where he met two servants of Pharaoh. Both of them had troubling dreams, and by the power of God, Joseph gave each of them an accurate interpretation, and because one of them was about to be released from prison and restored to his place serving the king, Joseph said: "Please remember me, and use your influence to get me out of here". But his new buddy quickly forgot him. "Joseph, what's the meaning of it all?" "No meaning at all. I guess we just live in a cruel world."

Two years later, though, Pharaoh has a troubling dream, and when no one can interpret it, the servant FINALLY remembers Joseph, and by God's hand he interprets Pharaoh's dream about a coming famine, and soon finds himself in charge of Egypt itself, storing up grain for the tough times ahead. Now he's free and he's wealthy and he has a wife and kids. "Joseph, what's the meaning of it all?" "Well, I can't say for sure. I guess God rewarded me for all my trouble, and that's good. I would have rather stayed home though. Who knows why things happen?"

And then one day, his own brothers come to town, looking for food. The family of Jacob is in trouble. Canaan has been hit hard by famine. The children of Abraham, the family line of the Messiah, faces extermination.

And one of their very own just so happens to be in charge of the grain stores of Egypt.

"Joseph, what's the meaning of it all?" Well, in **Genesis 45:5-7**, Joseph said to his brothers: **"...God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt."**

I tell you this not to imply that all suffering has a happy ending in this life if God is in control, or that YOUR suffering will have a happy ending in this life. Far from it. But to declare suffering meaningless is an astounding act of faith itself, faith in your own abilities of perception.

That said, here's a warning. We can accept in faith that God can bring meaning out of pain and even tragedy, but we should be VERY careful about trying to come up with meaning to explain someone's pain. I heard some awful examples of that such as: "Your child died maybe because God needed a flower in his garden". Nonsense like that has no place in Christian faith. Often the only thing we can do, should do, is to cry with someone and admit we don't know why.

Now that's as far as we'll take it today, and we'll leave some significant aspects of the issue of pain for next week. The last thing I'll say is that God gave us his most definitive response to the problem of pain at Calvary. Christ Jesus, crucified – it isn't an explanation of why we suffer, it's God entering the suffering with us and ultimately redeeming it. God perhaps doesn't tell us why, but neither does he exempt himself.

And so, we can trust him when he says: **...in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.**