Sunday, March 15, 1998
SINNERS AND SUFFERING
Luke 13:1-9

Is there a direct relationship between sin and suffering in your life and mine? Do good people have less suffering in their lives than bad people? Do bad people suffer more than good people? These were the questions on the minds of some people who told Jesus one day the story of some Galileans who had been killed by Pontius Pilate. They didn't directly ask the question, so Jesus put it into words for them. Jesus asked, "Do you think that because the Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"

If you answer "yes" to this question, it seems to solve lots of problems. It answers the riddle of why bad things happen to people — bad things only happen to bad people. It punishes sinners right out in the open as a warning to everyone. It describes a God who obeys the laws of physics: for every action, there is an opposite and equal reaction. It's a tempting equation, but Jesus said it was not an accurate one.

But it's still in use. I think every minister I know could tell a story like this one I read last week. A pastor told about receiving a call to sit with a mother while her five-year-old daughter was in surgery. Earlier in the week, the girl had been playing with a friend when her head began to hurt. By the time she found her mother, she could no longer see. At the hospital, a CAT scan confirmed that a large tumor was pressing on the girl's optic nerve, and she was scheduled for surgery as soon as possible.

On the day of the operation, the pastor found the mother sitting in the surgery waiting room beside an ashtray full of cigarette butts. This happened some time ago when smoking was still allowed in some parts of the hospital. The mother of the little girl in surgery smelled as if she had smoked every one of them, although she was not smoking when the pastor arrived.

She was staring at a patch of carpet in front of her, with her eyebrows raised in that half-hypnotized look that warned the pastor to proceed cautiously. The pastor sat down beside the mother, and after some small talk, the mother told her how awful it was. She even told the minister why all this suffering had come into her life and that of her little girl.

"It's my punishment," she said, "for smoking these damned cigarettes. God couldn't get my attention any other way, so God made my baby sick." Then she started crying so hard that what she said came out like a siren: "Now I'm supposed to stop smoking, but I can't. I'm going to kill my own children."

This was difficult for the minister to accept, so she decided to answer in a direct way. She told the mother, "I don't believe in a God like that. The God I know wouldn't do something like that."

Later, when the minister reflected on what had happened, she said, "The only problem with my response was that it messed with the mother's worldview at the very moment she needed it most. However miserable it made her, she preferred a punishing God to an absent or capricious one." Then the minister said, "I may have been able to reconcile a loving God with her daughter's brain tumor, but at the moment, the mother could not. If there were something wrong with her daughter, then there had to be a reason. She was even willing to be the reason. At least that way she could get a grip on the catastrophe."

We know the feeling. Most of us are tempted to react in the same way. Calamity strikes, and we wonder what we did wrong. We scrutinize our behavior, our relationships, our diets, our beliefs. We hunt for some cause to explain the effect in hopes that we can stop causing it. What we desire above all is control over the chaos in our lives.

So we can understand the questions posed to Jesus about the relationship between sinners and suffering. In this same conversation with Jesus, another disaster was mentioned which caused a lot of suffering. “What about those 18 innocent people who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Were they worse sinners than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?”

On another occasion, the disciples asked Jesus, “Teacher, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” There must be a reason. When things go right for me, it must be because I am living right, and when things go wrong, it must be because I am living wrong. Suffering goes with sin. Every child knows this rule: when I do good, I’m rewarded. When I do wrong, I’m punished. Isn’t this how it goes with God? And Jesus says, “No, that’s not how it works with God. But if you don’t repent, you will also perish.”

Now, in some cases, it is true: suffering does go with sin. If you commit a crime and end up in jail, if you lie and your reputation is ruined, if you run short of money because you spent it all greedily on gambling, then sin indeed has caused your suffering. We all know of specific instances where sin and suffering are related. But Jesus said you cannot make it a general rule that applies all the time in every situation. Bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. As Jesus said in another place, “God makes the sun shine on the good and the evil, and the rain fall on the just and unjust.”

The mystery of why some good people suffer and some bad people prosper is a universal one. For thousands of years, we human beings have pondered these questions.

Suffering comes to us whether we are good or bad in a variety of ways. There is physical suffering and mental or spiritual suffering. You can live in a beautiful home and have children who are doing well in school. But if, at the same time, you are being divorced by your spouse of twenty years, know that you are no longer loved, and feel that you are being methodically, legally, and publicly rejected, you know what suffering is.

Or you could be a man or woman of fifty and be told by your employer that you are no longer needed. You could be a person who seems to have everything — business success, social prestige, money, good looks — who nevertheless struggles with some secret sin and guilt and is suffering more than anyone will ever realize. A lot of suffering is hidden.

There is the suffering of the adolescent young person who is trying to understand who he or she is and wonders if anyone likes him or her. There is the suffering of the hungry, the homeless, the political prisoner, the refugee, the abused child, the abused spouse who can’t understand why she is the object of so much cruelty and abuse.

There is the suffering of a prolonged and painful illness that brings with it the craving for death. And there is the suffering of those who stand by the bedside and watch someone they love writhe in pain. There is the suffering that comes from the untimely death of someone we love. There is the suffering we bear from unjust criticism, gossip, and complaining people. There is the suffering of parents who watch their child get in with the wrong crowd, make disastrous decisions, and waste his or her talent and ability.

Why suffering comes to good people continues to be a nagging question, and Jesus does not answer it directly. Instead, he implies that it is the wrong question. I believe the reason Jesus rejected this question is because it causes us to lay blame and find fault in others. We can point fingers and say that someone is getting what he or she deserves.

Jesus wants us to stop comparing our spiritual pulse with other people. He wants us to stop going around judging who's really blessed by God and who isn't because of the things they do.

According to Jesus, there is no adequate or satisfying explanation for life's unfairness. Terrible things happen, and you are not always to blame. All you can do is to continue to examine your relationship with God. If that relationship is in order, then any suffering, confusion, or tragedy, even though unfair and undeserved, will be bearable because you trust in a God whose loving presence makes it so.

This is part of the mystery of the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross and how that event helps us deal with the mystery of our own suffering. It does so in two ways.

First, even though the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross do not solve the mystery of why good people suffer, it helps us to deal with our suffering because it tells us that in our deepest pain and suffering, God is there suffering along with us. God was in Jesus on the cross.

Jesus on the cross says that God does not stand at a distance from where we are, shouting encouragement to us; rather, God is involved in our pain and suffering. Among all the historic religious traditions, only in Christianity is God depicted as suffering. This is both a surprising and incredible affirmation. God suffers with us in our suffering. God does not inflict pain and suffering on us but helps to bear the pain that is part and parcel of life.

Have you ever noticed that you will nearly always find the loudest voices that keep asking, "How can there be a good God and at the same time life be so tragic and unjust?" belong to the spectators of life's deepest sufferings and not to the sufferers themselves? You will hardly ever find that the people who are suffering the most are the biggest skeptics and non-believers. Indeed, the fact is that those among us who have endured the most painful suffering have also produced the most shining examples of unconquerable faith. Why?

Because it is in their suffering that they have discovered God suffering with them, and they have an experience of God's love, presence, and power that sustains them. They know firsthand, as the Psalmist knew, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

Take a human example. What is the most comfort to you? You are suffering deeply, and someone tries to bolster your spirits by speaking words of encouragement — all done with the best intentions. But here is another friend who comes, sits, and suffers with you — maybe speaking few words at all.

Does not the friend who sits and suffers with you bring you a comfort far deeper than words? It is the good news of the Christian faith that God is even closer in your suffering than your closest friend. God is in you. You are created in God's image. Therefore, your sufferings are also God's sufferings.

We tend to say so many trite and trivial things in the face of tragedy and suffering. We chirp our bright explanations and talk about “all for the best” and “positive thinking.” The truth is, we know only this: that God does not abandon us or leave us alone; God participates in our pain and, in that way, helps us to bear the hurt of life.

St. Paul wrote, “Nothing can separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Nothing. Who among us can even comprehend the kind of love that dies on a cross and does not fight back? Who among us can comprehend the kind of love that forgives one’s enemies?

Secondly, the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross also help us in our suffering, not only because we know God suffers with us, but also because in our suffering, we are taking part in God’s redemptive activity and God’s victory. God is in your suffering with you, and you are in your suffering with God.

To put it another way, the cross helps us in our suffering because the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross are redemptive, and our suffering can also be redemptive.

Here’s what one father wrote to his children about suffering and how it can be redemptive: “The question, my children, is not whether you will suffer, or why you will suffer, but how you will suffer. For either you will take the world’s terms as your own and give as good as you get, an eye for an eye, spit for spite, pain in equal measure — or you will find in unearned suffering an opportunity for the spirit.

“The presence of Christ in you changes suffering into redemption. And not only for you, but your suffering can contribute to the redemption of others and of the whole creation.” Even though we cannot help but ask the question, “Why do good people suffer?” Jesus tells us in this story that a better question to ask is, “What are you going to do with your life, with the good times and the bad times?”

Can you trust God in joy and pain to be your God? Can you let go of your demand that God be God on your terms? Can you love God without linking your love to the cards life deals you?

What is the Christian answer to the mystery of suffering? Not an explanation, but a reinforcing presence. God is in it with you, and you are in it with God. St. Paul wrote, “I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us…. We know that in everything God works for good with those who love God, who are called according to God’s purposes.” Amen.