Sunday, March 18, 2001
TRYING TO MAKE SENSE OUT OF SUFFERING
Luke 13:1-9

A few weeks ago, on March 5, all of us were once again shocked by the shooting that took place at Santana High School in Southern California. Two students were killed, and 13 other people were wounded. According to the news reports, Charles Andrew Williams, 15, a freshman, surrendered after allegedly firing more than 30 shots in and around a boy's bathroom. He is being held on murder and other charges stemming from the shooting. Later that same week, an eighth-grade Pennsylvania girl was accused of shooting one of her classmates in the shoulder at school.

Whenever such bad things happen, the human instinct is to try to make some sense of it. Why did two innocent students die? Why were others injured? What was the motive, if any, behind these shootings? Think of the deep suffering the parents are experiencing. What did all of these people do, if anything, to deserve this kind of suffering?

The sheriff of the county where the California school shootings took place, Bill Kolender, has faced similar situations before. He was previously San Diego's police chief and dealt with one of the nation's worst plane crashes and the suicide of 39 members of the Heaven's Gate religious cult. "It doesn't get any easier," he said, "I'm overwhelmed with the pain these people have to go through."

You know the questions. Your father or mother dies suddenly, or one of your children is killed accidentally, or your wife dies of cancer, leaving three little children behind, and you ask, "What did I do to deserve the pain and suffering I'm experiencing? Where is God in all of this?" By asking such questions, you are attempting to make some sense out of the senseless.

Is there always a connection between sin and suffering in your life? Aren't good people supposed to have less suffering in their lives than bad people? Or conversely, aren't bad people supposed to suffer more than good people?

These were the questions on the minds of some people who asked Jesus about some Galileans who had been killed by Pontius Pilate. They said, and I'm paraphrasing, "Tell us, Professor Jesus, have you heard about those Galileans whom Pontius Pilate had killed right there in the Temple as they were offering their sacrifices to God? Wouldn't you say that was some kind of sign that God's kingdom is near? Surely they must have deserved such a harsh punishment from God. And what about those eighteen citizens of Jerusalem who died when the tower of Siloam collapsed on them? We can't even begin to imagine what they must've done to get God so mad at them!"

If you could make a direct cause-and-effect relationship between all suffering and some kind of sinful behavior on the part of the persons suffering, it would solve lots of problems. It would answer the riddle of why bad things happen to people. It would mean that bad things only happen to bad people. It would punish sinners right out in the open as if it obeys a law of physics: "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." It's a tempting equation — if you suffer, it must be because of some awful sin you've committed. But Jesus said it was not an accurate one.

However, it's still in use. Every minister I know could tell a story like this one. A call came to the minister to be with a mother while her five-year-old daughter was in surgery. The young 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 CT scan confirmed that a large tumor was pressing on the child's optic nerve, and surgery was scheduled as soon as possible.

On the day of the operation, the minister 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 permitted in some parts of the hospital. The mother of the child in surgery smelled as if she had smoked every one of them, although she was not smoking when the minister got there.

She was staring at a patch of carpet in front of her, with her eyebrows raised in that half-hypnotized look that warned the minister to proceed cautiously. After some small talk, the mother told her how terrible she was. She even told the minister why all this suffering had come into her life and that of her child.

"It's my punishment," she said, "for smoking these awful cigarettes. God couldn't get my attention any other way, so God made my daughter 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. My smoking is causing God to kill my daughter."

This was difficult for the minister to accept, so 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 was reflecting on what had happened, she said, "The only problem with my response was that it messed up the mother's worldview at the very moment she needed it most. However miserable it made her, this mother preferred a punishing God to an absent or capricious one." The minister added, "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. At least that way, she could get a grip on the catastrophe."

You know the feeling. Calamity strikes, and you wonder what you did wrong. You scrutinize your behavior, your relationships, your diet, your beliefs. You hunt for some cause to explain the effect in the hope that you can stop causing it. What you desire above all else is some kind of control over the chaos in your life. You are trying to make sense out of the senseless.

You can understand the questions posed to Jesus about the relationship between sinners and suffering: "Were those who died greater 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 you, it must be because you are living right, and when things go wrong, it must be because you are 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? But surprise! Jesus told the people who asked the questions that day, "No, that's not how it always works with God."

In many cases, it is true. Suffering often does go with sin. If you commit a crime and end up in jail, if you lie and your reputation is ruined, or if you run short of money because you spent it all on gambling or squandered it wastefully in some other way, then indeed your wrong behavior

has bad consequences, and suffering follows. All sin does indeed result in some form of suffering, not only for the sinner but for other innocent people as well.

According to Jesus in this story, the problem comes when you begin to twist that notion around and make it say that all suffering must be the result of some sin. That's precisely what Job's so-called friends did. They saw the pain and anguish he was enduring and assumed he must have sinned.

Jesus is saying that you cannot make it a general rule that applies all the time in every situation. Bad things do happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. As he said in another place, "God makes the sun to shine on the good and the evil, and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust." The mystery of why good people suffer and some bad people prosper is a universal one. For thousands of years, human beings have pondered these questions.

The fact is, there is some suffering that comes to you whether you are good or bad. There is physical suffering, and there is mental or spiritual suffering. You could be a man or woman of 50, and you are 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 guilt and inside you are suffering more than anyone will ever realize.

There is the suffering of the adolescent who is trying to understand who she or he is and wonders if anyone likes them. There is the suffering of the hungry, the homeless, the political prisoner, the refugee, the abused child, and the abused spouse who endure so much cruelty and abuse.

There is the suffering of prolonged and painful illness, which brings with it the craving for death. And there is the suffering of those who stand by and watch someone they love deal with severe pain.

Why suffering comes to good people continues to be a nagging question, and Jesus does not answer it directly. Rather, he implies it is the wrong question. He went on to say that there is a lesson to be learned here, a very important one. It's not that the poor victims of these two tragedies were worse sinners than anyone else. No, the lesson to be learned here is much broader and deeper than that. The lesson is this: when you become preoccupied with how and to what extent others have sinned and are suffering, you begin to lose sight of your own sins. You begin to conclude that since you haven't suffered catastrophes and distresses like other people have, you must have a higher ranking with God. Others are only getting what is coming to them — serves them right.

The message is: stop comparing your spiritual pulse with others. Stop going around judging who's really blessed by God and who isn't, based on the suffering others are enduring.

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 own relationship with God. If that relationship is in order, then any suffering, confusion, or tragedy, even though unfair and undeserved, will be more 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 relates to human suffering.

It does not solve the mystery of why good people suffer. At the same time, it helps us 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. God does not stand at a distance, shouting encouragement, but is present in our pain and suffering. Among all the historic religious traditions, only in Christianity is God depicted as suffering with us.

Have you ever noticed that the loudest voices which 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 those who 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 which 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.”

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