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The Problem of Suffering and Evil

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on
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When we asked folks to submit topics for this sermon series, the number one response was the problem of evil and suffering. It was variously phrased as the question of why bad things happen to good people, why there are things like tsunamis and earthquakes, and why there is so much pain and disease in the world. All of these questions fall under the technical term of “theodicy,” which means the justification of God in light of the existence evil, and which one of you smart folks wrote as your topic. This morning I invite you to consider some of the ways theologians have tried to approach this problem. In the short span of a sermon, we can only scratch the surface and look at a few of the major theories. And, there will be no easy answers. In fact, we may find that there are no answers at all, and that the proper response to suffering and evil in the world is a profound and reverent silence. And yet, the seriousness of the question requires us to face the problem seriously. While we may not find any easy answers, we may find that our faith has been strengthened and deepened by asking the questions.

The problem of theodicy revolves around three central affirmations. One, God is all powerful. Two, God is completely good. And three, evil exists. Difficulties arise when we try to maintain all three affirmations. David Hume raised the problem most pointedly. “Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then He is impotent [not all powerful]. Is God able to prevent evil, but not willing? Then He is malevolent, [not good]. Is He both able and willing? Whence then is evil?”¹ Theodicy is the attempt to respond to this dilemma.

One important approach to the problem of suffering and evil, the approach of what are called Harmony Theories, says that suffering and evil are parts of a more encompassing, universal harmony. For some, this harmony already exists, but is difficult to perceive because we are finite creatures and cannot see the whole of the universe. For others, this harmony is in the making and will come about at some future time. From our limited point of view we see certain things as evil, but if we could see things in their totality, we would see that evil and good are both necessary for the overall harmony of creation. Harmony theorists like to use the analogy of painting. In a painting there are dark areas as well as bright areas. If we look only at the dark areas, we might think they are ugly. But if we look at the dark areas in the context of the painting as a whole, we would see that they contribute to the overall harmony and perfection of the painting. Like the dark areas in a painting, then, suffering and evil are essential to the overall

¹ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Hafner, 1948), p. 64

beauty of the universe playing off of the brighter and more vibrant parts of the world. Whether one believes in a present harmony or a future harmony, suffering and evil are seen as the darker colors on a universal canvas that contribute to the beauty and perfection of the whole.

There are problems with Harmony Theories. They do pretty well with the minor bumps and bruises of life, the struggles and strains that allow us to grow and perceive the good things in life, but these theories seem to break down in the face of massive suffering and radical evil. In the face of the radical evil of things like genocide, many people feel that Harmony Theories are morally tone deaf. For many people, the claim that the slaughter of millions of innocent people during the Holocaust somehow contributes to the overall beauty and harmony of the universe is morally repugnant. As Ivan Karamazov might put it, if the suffering of innocent children is necessary for some kind of eternal harmony, then he'd rather have nothing to do with it and would gladly return his ticket.

Another major approach to the problem of evil is called the Free-Will Defense. Free-Will Defenses claim that evil and suffering arise in our world because of a misuse of freedom. Here, we might think of our Old Testament lesson where the Lord exhorts his people to choose life. He says, "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity." In this passage, God exhorts people to choose life, but he leaves them free to choose between life and prosperity and death and adversity. There is a freedom of choice that can lead to either positive or negative consequences. So we can summarize Free-Will arguments in a rather straightforward way. They begin by saying free will is a good thing. This means that a world where people have the freedom to make meaningful choices is better than a hypothetical world where they don't. And that means people are free to do bad things as well as to do good things. Now, since God is reasonable and good, God must create the best possible world that he can. It follows that God must create a world where people have free will because such a world is better than a world in which there is no freedom. The upshot of this argument is that God is not responsible if people choose to do evil things. God is operating under self-imposed constraints which means he will not compel humans to do good all the time. So the evil in this world is the result of the misuse of human free will. God remains reasonable and benevolent. He does not want humans to make bad choices, but he didn't want to create the world as a grand puppet show either. Better to have a world in which there is genuine freedom of choice. The ability of humans to make bad choices and to cause evil and suffering comes along with the package.

Now, a lot of people find this a helpful response. No doubt, a lot of the suffering and pain in the world comes from people doing bad things. But, as many folks point out, the weakness of this argument is that it only seems to account for what is called Moral Evil: that is, the evil in the world that is caused by human beings and the choices they make. Free-Will Defenses aren't much help with what is called Natural Evil: things like earthquakes and tsunamis and disease. Surely, a lot of the pain in the world can be attributed to human beings. Just watch the nightly news and you'll get more than enough of this. But, as we watch the nightly news, we also see the devastation caused by things like earthquakes, and these things don't seem attributable to free will.

A recent argument by John Polkinghorne tries to address this problem.² He draws an analogy with the Free-Will Defense. He says, just as a world that includes human freedom is better than a world in which there is no freedom, so, in the physical world, it is better to have a world that is allowed to make itself through "a free process of evolutionary exploration" than a world that is produced ready made by divine fiat. So a world in which the creation, in a certain

² See John Polkinghorne, *Science and Theology: An Introduction* (SPK/Fortress, 1998)

sense, has the freedom to make itself is better than a ready-made world would have been. But there is a cost to having such free processes in the world. There is an inevitable shadow side to the evolutionary process. It will yield not only great fruitfulness, but there will also be ragged edges and blind alleys. These ragged edges and blind alleys will be the source of some of the suffering in the world, but these things will necessarily happen in a world in which there is free process. Polkinghorne gives the example of genetic mutation which is the engine that has driven the development of life in the universe. A positively good thing for us human beings, right! But there is a shadow side. If the DNA in germ cells is able to mutate and produce new forms of life, the DNA of somatic cells will also be able to mutate and may produce cancer. The presence of cancer in the world is surely an anguishing fact, but it is the shadow side of a creation that is able to make itself. So the Free-Process Defense tries to account for Natural Evil because things like malignancy are the necessary cost of a good world that is able to make itself through free processes.

Now, this is an explanation for the Natural Evil of things like cancer and earthquakes. Whether it is a good one or not I leave up to you. Many people find these explanations helpful, others do not, so either way you are in good company. However, some recent theologians have claimed that the church ought to get out of the business of trying to provide explanations for the problem of evil. They say this for a number of reasons, but they all boil down to pretty much the same thing: offering explanations or reasons for why there is evil and suffering in the world is not the proper business of Christian faith. Yes, these theologians say, there is evil and suffering in the world, but our job is not to try to explain it, but to try to resist evil, where we can, and to try to relieve the suffering of others. When we encounter someone who is in great pain, the Christian response is to try to relieve the pain. Rational explanations are secondary concerns.

Think of it this way: if I somehow managed to get a thorn stuck in my hand and I am in great pain, the first thing I'm looking for is not a philosophical explanation for how this situation came about. You know, I have this thorn stuck in my hand and I'm bleeding and I say, "can somebody please help me," and along comes a Free-Will Theorist who proceeds to tell me that my ability to stick my hand in a thorn bush is a choice I have made in the best of possible worlds and isn't it great that I live in such a world where I can make such a choice. Regrettable that I made a bad choice and got myself hurt, but doesn't it make you feel better to know that you had a free choice to make in the first place? Well, no, not right now, I've got a thorn in my hand and I'm bleeding. I don't need a theory I need someone to remove the thorn. Luckily, I see John Polkinghorne ahead and maybe he can help. I show Professor Polkinghorne the thorn in my hand, and he proceeds to explain to me the whole 14 billion year history of the universe and to tell me that the same processes that allow for the evolution of these beautiful roses also allow for the evolution of thorns. Regrettable that I got stuck with one of these, but they are the shadow side of living in a universe that produces beautiful roses as well as nasty thorns. Meanwhile, I've lost about a quart of blood and I'm beginning to lose consciousness. Finally, I come across a nurse in a Red Cross uniform and she, without offering any explanations, removes the thorn, bandages me up, and gives me some juice and cookies to eat while I regain my composure. Okay, I am exaggerating, but you get the point. Many theologians are saying the appropriate response to the problem of evil and suffering is not to try to offer rational explanations, but rather to try to remove the evil and relieve the suffering.

Now, the reason they think this is because of the life and ministry of Christ. In him, we don't see someone who sat around trying to figure out the deep meaning of suffering and evil in the world. Rather, in his life and ministry, we see someone who entered deeply and passionately

into the needs of world, and where he found evil he tried to resist it and where he found suffering he tried to relieve it. In his life we do not find rational explanation, but rather complete and perfect compassion. And in this life, Christian faith sees a God who does not stand aloof from all the pain and suffering of the world, but rather a God who enters into it and suffers alongside us. Here's how Miroslav Volf answered the question of where God was during a tsunami: "Just as God was in some mysterious way in the Crucified One, God was in the midst of the Tsunami carnage, listening to every sigh, collecting every tear, resonating with the trembling of each fear-stricken heart. And just as God was in the Resurrected One, so God was in each helping hand, in each decision to sacrifice one's own life so that another could live. God suffered and God helped."³ So, the ultimate response to the problem of suffering is not a rational explanation, but the claim that God suffers too. God's loving solidarity with those who suffer does not abolish their suffering, but it does speak to the pain and the sense of abandonment that come with it. The fact that God endures suffering when humans endure suffering gives people meaning and dignity no matter what may befall them. And the claim that God was in the Resurrected One does not abolish suffering either, but rather gives hope that pain and suffering will one day be redeemed.

We have just scratched the surface. Some may find these theories helpful and others not. And, of course, there are other responses to the problem of suffering and evil. Being a good Episcopalian, I don't like having to choose. But, regardless of the position you may hold, it does seem bedrock that our faith is about compassion, which literally means "to suffer with." And in that compassionate faith, I expect we will try to stop evil and relieve suffering where we can, try to share the burdens of people in great pain, to keep them in our hearts and prayers, and to hold them always in the presence of our compassionate God who has not abandoned us but rather stands by us as a fellow sufferer and who will ultimately bring us to dwell with him where he will wipe every tear, where death will be no more, and where mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

³ Miroslav Volf, *Against The Tide: Love in a Time of Petty Dreams and Persisting Enmities* (Eerdmans, 2010), p. 37