

LENTEN SERMON SERIES: THE BIG QUESTIONS:

Palm Sunday: “Why is there so much injustice in the world?”

Texts: .Lamentations 3:34-36.49-60 Why? Why?!

John 8:1-11 A question turned around..

As Syrian forces continue to relentlessly bomb the 400,000 civilians who live in Eastern Ghouta, two terrified children have taken to Twitter in a desperate call for help. On Thursday, Noor Khatib, 10, and her sister, Alaa, 8, shared a video taken shortly after a nearby bombing shattered their windows and slashed open Alaa’s forehead. In the video, the children can be seen crying in pain and fear as dust and debris from the bombing swirls like a thick fog both inside and outside the house.(February 2018) Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of American young people are taking to the streets, demanding an end to the easy availability of assault rifles which are killing children in their country.

Upon receiving your questions I unfolded a little blue paper that read:

“Why do some of us have so much, and others, especially children, live in so much pain?”

I could feel your heart, unknown friend; your passion and compassion. I could feel your pain. It is mine too. It is the question that has moved humanity's noblest spirits. Its a question that is echoed in the tear marks we can sense on the crumbled pages of the book of Lamentations:

“My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within; my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed, because children and infants faint (with hunger) in the streets of the city....my eyes cause me grief at the fate of all the young women in the city....my eyes flow with rivers of tears...my people are destroyed” (chapters 2&3)

Upon reading this -Who would not think of the destroyed cities in Syria and the children dying of hunger in once beautiful Yemen? And who would not see in the very fact that these cries are recorded in our Holy Scriptures an indication that God cares?

What can I do with this question in 20 minutes? I've decided to give some pointers as to why the injustices in the world and the suffering of children need not be an obstacle to faith, but are a call to faith.

In Lamentations, I find three convictions: First: Suffering and injustice are a scandal. Second, God sees it: and sometimes is experienced as coming to the rescue, sometimes is experienced as remaining hidden. Third: This suffering must be atoned or righted.

These convictions of Lamentations echo true hundreds of years later. Suffering of children and the world's injustices are taken very seriously here. No glossing over it. But how can we keep the faith given all that suffering? It is not easy, but it is perhaps the only way through the suffering. Let me explain what I mean.

Lets look at the story of Alyosha and Ivan.

No one to my knowledge has expressed the tension between faith in God and the reality of suffering better than Russian Novelist Fjodor Dostoyevski in “The brothers Karamazov”. Older Brother Ivan is disgusted with the world. The suffering of children at the hands of wealthy or ignorant despots illustrate for him everything that is wrong with the world. The way God has made the world can not be justified. Ivan leans towards atheism and suicide – he revolts; he “wants to give his entrance ticket” to the world back.

Younger brother Alyosha is just as upset by the suffering of children as Ivan is, but he chooses to respond to that by dedicating his life to Christ. He quietly listens to the accusations his brother hurls at the God he does not believe in. Alyosha does not defend God to his brother, but for Alyosha morally in this world there is only one response: To engage with the suffering. He has entered a monastery as a novice and trains himself in the path of humility and Christian love. Later on in the book Alyosha realizes that he must leave the monastery, and he becomes a mentor to several children and helps them, as he can- in different ways.

1. Why many see the problem of evil as hindrance to faith and what Christians offer to this:

The world is and always has been a “valley of blood and tears” in many respects. Many pose the logical problem and say: Either God is not all good- then I want nothing to do with God. Or God is not all powerful, then I want nothing to do with God either, because God who is not all powerful is not God. (*The theodicy question*)

For Christians in this logical chain of argument we have to make a concession here, and it is on the side of “all powerful”. The God we believe in is not all powerful in the conventional meaning of the word. God is Love. Self sacrificial love, not power is God's nature. (1st John 4:7-21)

If we want to maintain that God is both “all powerful” and “all loving” - then we must let God's power be defined by God self: “My power is made perfect in weakness” God states to Paul. (2ndCor. 12:9)

God's power towards a suffering child then, would be in the power of hugs and words of comfort as a mother offers her child in a bomb attack. God's power moves a military leader to refrain from bombing all together and neighbouring state leaders to accept unprecedented numbers of refugees. God's power is in those who volunteer in aid organizations across the conflict zones of our world. God's power is in those who speak out and demand an end to suffering. God's power is in those who do not repay evil for evil. God's power is in those who step in and stop the bullets.

2. Why we see evil as a call to faith – (because we recognize evil as sin)

If God is love, then what is evil? Where does it come from?

The bible sees evil as powerful absence of goodness, as space of desolate “turning away from God”. God did not create evil: according to our stories - a “void” and “chaos “was first, then God- in- action breathing life into what is declared good; all of life.

Note that in this biblical view not all suffering would be evil. In nature, where baby bunnies get eaten by coyotes and forest fires consume little fawns and their mothers– there is plenty of suffering, but evil is something only conscious beings are capable of. And this is why it causes the greatest suffering. So the existence of evil is the flip side of the God's desire to create conscious beings who can be in conscious relationship, especially humans.

Biblically, humans start with original goodness. This does not mean that humans at one point in time were collectively better than we are as a species right now.

Original goodness does mean that we can tell within us, (and humans could always tell this)- that harmony with God and one another is what we are made for . Humans are not parasites without a moral conscience. We are “homo religiosus” (*Mircea Eliade*).

Religious by nature. We know. We have a capacity for empathy. Everyone feels that original goodness unless we have been seriously broken*. (example at the very end of document) Yet, we are prone to wrong choices.

We wrestle with the question :Why does God allow us these choices?

The answer must have to do with freedom which is the pre-condition to all relationships that are whole and loving.

God allows then “absence of God/Love” because God creates a world that is free to respond to the God/Love that called it into being.

For us then, “Repentance” is necessary in thought and action.

Repentance is not self-loathing (as some have misunderstood it to be) instead it means: having a 'change of heart” and “turning one's life around”, back to God and neighbour, and only that leads us back “home”; into wholeness.

The cry of Jesus in Mark 1;15 to turn around and change direction summarizes the focus of his ministry. (The Greek word for turning is translated into English mostly as “repent”.)

As humans we choose every day between estrangement from our true nature- or to embrace the role given to us: Partners of God in the stewardship of life on this earth.

Of course nobody is conscious of this choosing every minute /all the time.

Its tragic when many are not ever conscious that they actually have choices.

It does make a huge difference how much we are conscious of our calling and how much we try to embrace it. While we will always carry some brokenness with us while on earth we can reach (and many have reached!) a state of mind and life where honesty and repentance and kindness are real and have enormously positive effects on others.

So the answer to the question of **“Why do some of us have so much, and others, especially children, live in so much pain?”** is **“because we are estranged from our true self, our relationships are broken, we have made the wrong choices, we stray far from our calling.**

In other words, because of sin.

We must speak of Sin. How does sin manifest?

People choose comfort over courage, control over vulnerability, cheer over compassion. And often that means we do nothing- we choose not to choose, not to act. The subtlest form of sin is apathy.

Wise folk in the Christian church have, for educational reasons, drawn up classifications of “sin” for centuries. That's to help us recognize the particular dynamics of estrangement. These catalogues go all the way back to a 4th century monk by the name of Evagrius. You can't turn away or wrestle with something you can't identify – that's why the manifestations of sin were written down and explained-for spiritual growth of the monks.

Whats interesting is how these ancient dynamics are really just as relevant today- human nature has not changed: six of the “deadly sins” are relatively easy to understand,

gluttony, greed, lust/narcissism -(and these are the sins that most obviously have affected the health of our planet so greatly); also: wrath, envy, pride - but

the worst because hardest to recognize in ourselves and subtlest, is what the early church called “acedia” or later “sloth”- Writer Dorothy Sayers describes sloth as "an attitude that believes in nothing, cares for nothing, seeks to know nothing, interferes with nothing, enjoys nothing, hates nothing, finds purpose in nothing, lives for nothing, and remains alive because there is nothing for which it will die.” This is a bit extreme- and may sound like clinical depression- but its of course not that. It is seen in what people like writer Brenee Brown describe as key markers of our society. Which we must overcome: We don't want to be vulnerable because we don't know where it will lead us, we don't want to be criticised, so we rather do nothing, we don't believe that we are truly worthy of a better life for the planet- so we hang our heads in shame.

So, the legislators in the US do not want to offend the gun lobby, do nothing to change the existing laws despite countless protests even by very young people, and so become complicit in the shooting deaths of thousands. That, in traditional Christian language, is sloth. The Sin of passivity and nothingness. Sign of a totally broken relationship: Little real love for self, little real love for neighbour, little real love for God. Brokenness and estrangement.

And so, the children in Syria and Sudan and the children in American schools ask, demand and wait and get shot. Continue to wait for adults to act and will continue to wait and get shot until adults can be bothered to overcome their sloth. Sin is real - and its not eating chocolates in Lent.

What is the way out? Sin must be taken on. Sin must be owned. Then we can enter a great turning around.

I forgive you should you be squirming in your seats when you hear this sin language.

You don't like the word- I don't like the word- sadly it has been use too much in its plural “sins”, in too many ways by people who thought they were better than others.

So do we avoid the language of sin altogether? No- because without an awareness of sin

there can not be an awareness of salvation.

Sin is estrangement from our true vocation to live in relationships that are whole, honest, loving. Our gospel reading this morning shows that – and a way forward: *An interpreted reading of John 8:1-11 follows:*

Vs 8:3 illustrates sin as estrangement: Look at the levels of estrangement (sin) here: “They”, several men- drag “one woman” and “make her stand before all of them” - They do this presumably to get punishment, to stone her, to feel good about themselves and their sense of enforcing their law. How much brokenness is in that already. The brokenness “they” accuse “her” of is “adultery” - estrangement from her husband in favour of someone else. This also is broken relationship. “They” want to “test” a person, someone who makes them uncomfortable with his compassion towards sinners- a third level of estrangement.

When the question comes this third person turns the question back onto those who ask. He does,(as someone in our study group said), the “Aikido martial arts move” - to use the opponent's strength against them-

“Which one of you is without sin? Let him throw the first stone.” “They” do have a strong sense of sin and would have only been too happy to carry out the punishment. However “They” are also people of God, with a conscience- and their strong awareness of sin helps them realize that yes, they too have brokenness in their lives. Lovely how it says that “beginning with the oldest”, (presumably the one with the most self knowledge!) one after the other, they fade away only to leave third party Jesus and the woman standing together.

“Neither do I condemn you;” says Jesus. And, he adds: “Don't do it again”.(8:11)

So there in that story is both- the reality of sin as broken relationship- and the possibility of salvation:

Salvation as restored relationship with self and others:

The men are “saved” in this story and brought closer to self knowledge, acceptance of the “grey zones” in their own lives, closer to compassion with this woman neighbour of theirs. And the woman is “saved” as her life is spared, but also in as much as she follows Jesus' request: don't do this again. Don't sin anymore. Its after all a broken relationship you have in your family life and you need to mend this.

In this story, Jesus' intervention prevented further bloodshed, further estrangement, further brokenness of bodies and hearts. Can you see how this is how God/Love acts in a world of suffering?

Owning (and taking on) our sinfulness leads to inner and outer freedom to be in loving relationship (salvation):

3.Conclusion: Evil calls for the response of faith. Alyosha's choice is the only one that makes the world better. You don't have to join a monastery or even believe in God. Being a humble humanist is a good start. But I think that a living relationship with God

is best to counter and restrain our tendency to abuse our freedom. A sense of humility before a loving God will give us a realistic assessment of our often problematic desires. Relationship with the ultimate source of Wholeness and Love allows us to love better. We relate to ourselves and to others without shame and become gentler and happier people in the process.

Finally: Why some have so much and others so little, why children continue to suffer is a question that will move us from contemplation to action, from reasoning to turning. Said in biblical language, it will move us to repentance in heart and action.

Suffering is a scandal, suffering is caused by actions rooted in sin, and so the most appropriate response is loving counter action.

As far as the children who are suffering right now in Syria and elsewhere – how can we act?

We can, for example, here in Annapolis Royal, bring one other family with children out of a war zone to safety. Please join the work of the new ARCARE.

* I watched a new Netflix movie about pope Francis' early years in Argentina this past week. Scenes from the US sponsored military coup from the 1970ies were shown- Junta men torturing prisoners while playing Tango music for themselves. This is so horrific, impossible to grasp. It was “The things they carried” (a volume of short stories by American novelist Tim O'Brien, about a platoon of American soldiers fighting on the ground in the *Vietnam* War) that helped me understand: These totally ordinary and sometimes even sentimental men had enough of compassion and humanity in them to not like killing and torturing other humans. In order to follow the orders to do so, they had to completely shut down their inner voice. Resorting to make the situation surreal and absurd such as playing nice music while doing something horrible -helped them shut down their inner voice of humanity. They de-tached themselves completely from what they were doing in order to be able to do it. After you do that for a while then comes the point when utter detachment becomes second nature, and some even enjoy it. The price is a total inner emptiness, filled with delusion about what is real.

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For further meditation: A passage from the “*Song of Faith*” United Church of Canada 2004

...Made in the image of God,
we yearn for the fulfilment that is life in God.
Yet we choose to turn away from God.
We surrender ourselves to sin,
a disposition revealed in selfishness, cowardice, or apathy.
Becoming bound and complacent
in a web of false desires and wrong choices,
we bring harm to ourselves and others.
This brokenness in human life and community

is an outcome of sin.
Sin is not only personal
but accumulates
to become habitual and systemic forms
of injustice, violence, and hatred.

We are all touched by this brokenness:
the rise of selfish individualism
that erodes human solidarity;
the concentration of wealth and power
without regard for the needs of all;
the toxins of religious and ethnic bigotry;
the degradation of the blessedness of human bodies
and human passions through sexual exploitation;
the delusion of unchecked progress and limitless growth
that threatens our home, the earth;
the covert despair that lulls many into numb complicity
with empires and systems of domination.
We sing lament and repentance.

Yet evil does not—cannot—
undermine or overcome the love of God.
God forgives,
and calls all of us to confess our fears and failings
with honesty and humility.
God reconciles,
and calls us to repent the part we have played
in damaging our world, ourselves, and each other.
God transforms,
and calls us to protect the vulnerable,
to pray for deliverance from evil,
to work with God for the healing of the world,
that all might have abundant life.
We sing of grace.

For the full text please go to the United Church of Canada link on this site.