



Fifth Sunday of Lent April 6, 2014 A

RESPONDING TO THE MYSTERY AND PRESENCE OF SUFFERING IN OUR LIVES

The Book of Job is the story that addresses the perennial issue of why bad things happen to good people.

Job is a good and faithful servant of God. But Satan tells God that the man is only faithful because God has blessed him greatly. If God removed Job's blessings, he would not be nearly as faithful. So God allows Job's blessings to be removed. He loses his material blessings and his children, and he is afflicted with sores all over his body. His nagging wife tells him to "curse God and die." To make matters worse, Job's friends, his so-called "comforters," tell Job that all these bad things are happening to him because he is a sinner. If only he would repent of his sin, his blessings would be restored. Job rejects the traditional belief that bad things are happening to him because he is a sinner. While Job rants and raves and becomes very impatient with life and even with God, he does remain faithful to God. His fidelity is summed up in the well-known lines:

"The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

The story has a good ending. In the last chapter, God praises his servant Job and restores all his blessings.

One cannot write an article about suffering with a beginning, middle and end. When we write about suffering, we write around it, and we explore it philosophically and theologically. We try to make some sense of it. But we can't package it.

Two reasons for human suffering

In pondering the mystery and presence of human suffering in the world—especially when it afflicts the good and the righteous—we ask 'why?' Why, God, are you allowing this good person to suffer in this way?

Human suffering is attributable in large part to (1) misuse of our own free will, and (2) our imperfect, evolving world.

Misuse of free will. God created man with a free will, which means that each of us is totally at liberty to make our own decisions. Most human suffering occurs as a result of poor choices and the misuse of our own free will. For example:

- Poor choice in career or relationships could result in a lot of unhappiness. We have character defects which could rob *us* of our peace and cause *others* whom we live and work with all kinds of stress and suffering.
- Greed on Wall Street and Main Street is pushing our economy to the brink of collapse.
- Drinking and driving injure and kill innocent lives.
- Improper care of our bodies leads to poor health or sometime diseases.
- Abuse of nature engenders all kinds of negative consequences for Mother Earth.
- On a global level, atrocious and ungodly decisions made by powerful individuals, leaders of nations, and ethnic and religious groups, bring about injustice and a degradation of human dignity.

We wonder why God allows some people to do terrible things. The answer is simple: God respects our human freedom. He could remove it and make human robots of us, but I doubt anyone would vote for that solution!

2. We live in an imperfect, evolving world. According to the *Catechism*, as creation moves towards its final state of perfection, God allows physical evil (sickness, natural disasters, etc.) to co-exist alongside physical good.

We live in an imperfect universe whose secrets we humans are constantly seeking to discover. It is good to often pray for all those engaged in scientific and medical research, that their findings (and their responsible application) may help us to enjoy life more fully on earth.

In the meantime, we live with "pockets of chaos" that can cause us immense suffering, e.g., earthquakes, tornadoes, tsunamis, etc. Thankfully, however, in the past fifty years, enormous strides have been made to help protect ourselves against such calamities.

Because medicine is an imperfect science, there are still diseases for which no cure has been found, some of them with fatal consequences. But here again, wonderful advances have been made that impact the quality of our lives here on earth.

Jesus' response to suffering

God does not answer Job's question of why a good God allows bad things to happen to good people. Neither does Jesus. In John 9:1-5, Jesus attests that suffering is not a case of God punishing someone. Someone once said: "Jesus came not to answer the question of suffering. Rather, he came to fill it with his presence." This, he surely did.

Nowhere in the Gospel do we see Jesus indifferent or aloof to people's suffering. Nowhere do we find Jesus telling sick people to put up with their sickness for it will bring them closer to God." Rather, we find Jesus confronting sickness as an evil, healing it everywhere he meets it—which is not to say that he healed *every* sick person in Palestine 2,000 years ago. He probably did not. Most likely, God will sometimes use sickness for a higher purpose, i.e., to awaken us spiritually and lead us closer to him. That said, we are also aware that sickness can lead people away from God and Church. I sometimes wonder what our parishes would be like if all pastors and parishioners took Jesus' mandate to "heal the sick" more seriously. It would mean that we would have lots of prayer teams and healing services where suffering people could come to receive healing prayer. I feel the Church in general has failed her people in this very important area of Christian ministry. We have made a few efforts to have a healing ministry at Ascension but, unfortunately, we have not persevered.

Our response to human suffering

When it comes to coping with and responding to human suffering, the wisdom in the *Serenity Prayer* seems to be most helpful.

God, help me to change what can be changed, to accept what cannot be changed, and grant me the wisdom to know the difference.

"Changing what can be changed"

When faced with human suffering, we can always pray for the grace to know what can be changed and to have the courage and strength to make the change.

Change of attitude. One of my all-time favorite sayings is: "*It is not the circumstances of our lives that will make us or break us. Rather, it is our attitude towards the circumstances of our lives.*" Let us take the example of two people faced with the same problem (e.g., a health issue, a hostile work environment, or an unhappy relationship). Granted that their circumstances are exactly the same, the way each of them would be impacted by the problem would most likely be very different. One may have developed the skills and attitude to cope rather well with his/her situation, while the other may find him/herself in a very stressful situation.

If we have a permanent ailment or if we lost a loved one, there is nothing we can do to reverse the situation. But we can change the attitude we bring to our present reality and that change of attitude can make a world of difference. It is usually the only difference between people who are miserable and people who are happy.

Willingness to reach out for help. Pride keeps many of us from seeking help that could reduce the suffering or pain in our lives and could help us to live happier lives. Fear of change could also keep us from doing things that reduce stress in our lives.

Some years ago, I went to counseling on and off for a period of time. The counseling, plus some spiritual direction, helped me to cope more efficiently with personal issues and to deal more effectively with people, especially difficult people. Going to the counseling and spiritual direction reduced the stress level in my life and helped me to live a happier and more meaningful life.

All of us carry some character defects within us. After all, none of us is perfect. Some of us have character flaws that add a lot of stress and emotional suffering to our lives. For example, we may have a big ego that needs a lot of attention. We may have a bad temper and an excessive need for control. We may have a difficult time forgiving life's hurts. We may have a very hard time saying, "I'm sorry, please forgive me." We may have insecurity and self-esteem issues that make it hard for us to see our own goodness, to forgive ourselves, or to confront people who mistreat us. We may carry a lot of fear within us: fear about the future, fear of dying, fear of failure and rejection. All of these weaknesses do impact our lives and our personal relationships.

The good news is that, with the help of Jesus, a bit of counseling and spiritual direction, participation in Church spirituality programs, and opening up to others, we can bring God's healing touch to many of our

character defects and weaknesses. But the question is: are we willing to reach out for help? Sadly, all too often, we are fearful or too proud to seek the help that could reduce the pain in our lives. We sometimes carry a burden of guilt for years for some past failures. A good confession, in most cases, would free us of that burden. But fear or pride could keep us from seeking the help we need.

Our bad economy is forcing many people to seek help for the first time in their lives. Some parents with children in our school would rather pull them out than seek tuition assistance. In this case, the pride of parents hurts their children.

Deepening our spirituality. A decision to deepen our spirituality can help us immensely as we deal with any and all forms of suffering in our lives. Many of you can testify how your faith has been a big help in difficult times. Just the other day, a woman shared with me how her faith is helping her to become more detached from material things during these hard times. She and her husband lost 50% of their investments in the past few months.

A true deepening of our relationship with God will help us to be more forgiving, more compassionate, more trustful, more joyful and peaceful, more humble, less jealous, less ego-centered, less controlling, etc. A false or superficial spirituality will not help us.

If we suffer from deep-rooted problems, we will most likely also need some psychological counseling.

"Accepting what we cannot change"

Some things cannot be changed, e.g., loss of a loved one. Other things cannot be changed—at least for *now* and maybe *never*, e.g., a particular physical or mental condition, a bad relationship, etc.

When the great poet John Milton went blind, he was initially very miserable. But when, with the grace of God, he was able to *accept* his blindness, he said that "he was filled with the light of God." The loss of his physical sight was replaced with spiritual enlightenment.

When preparing this column, I read a powerful story about a man who ended up in a mental institution due to a boxing accident which left him to deal with paranoid schizophrenia. Fortunately, Michael had a spiritual life or had developed one which helped him tremendously to deal with his pain. In the article, Michael writes:

The constant struggle for me over the years was trying to be healed, as well as always wondering where I had gone wrong and why this cross had been given to me, one which I could not shake. The harder I fought, the worse it became.

Then one night during my Holy Hour, Our Lord led me to accept what I had been so desperately trying to heal and to change and could not, no matter how many times I was prayed over or how many times I went to confession.

Then, when I accepted the simple truth that I had a cross to carry, a great joy and peace came into my life, because I suddenly realized that being mentally ill was not a character fault, as some would seem to suggest. Instead, I understood that it was a great grace and that healing comes in the acceptance of reality. I had to accept the reality that this suffering would be a constant companion - not an enemy but a loving friend, who would teach me compassion, gentleness and meekness.

Coming to accept what cannot be changed can be a huge challenge. Our ability to come to this acceptance will depend a lot on the level of our spirituality and, to some extent, on our personality make-up. Most of us would probably benefit from some counseling during a time like this.

"The wisdom to know the difference"

The *Serenity Prayer* asks that we discern what can and cannot be changed. Sometimes this is clear and sometimes it is not. When a death occurs, we know that a loved one will not return, though we may struggle with denial for a long time.

In the case of some health issue, we don't always know. Some ailment may be permanent, but then again, it may not. In this situation, our challenge is to accept what cannot be changed *now*, while doing all we can to bring healing to our body or mind. This is a time when we need the help of good doctors, a strong faith, and the support of faith friends.

Have a grace-filled Lent,

Le Sarah