



Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time B February 4, 2018

REFLECTIONS ON THE MYSTERY OF SUFFERING

The Book of Job, from which today's first reading is taken, 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."*

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

One cannot write a column 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 cannot package it.

Two reasons for human suffering

When we ponder the mystery and presence of human suffering in the world, especially the suffering that sometimes good people experience, most of us ask why? Why, God, are you allowing this good person to suffer in this way?

Two reasons for the vast majority of human suffering, if not for all of it, is the misuse of free will and the imperfect evolving world that we live in.

Reason #1: Misuse of free will. God created us with free will, which means that we humans can use our free will

to make good or bad choices. By and large, human suffering occurs because of poor choices and the misuse of free will.

For example, we make poor choices when it comes to career or relationships which can result in a lot of unhappiness and sometimes a lot of suffering. Greed on Wall Street and Main Street can cause the economy to collapse. We drink and drive, and people are killed or injured for life. We do not take care of our bodies and our health breaks down. We abuse Mother Earth and we incur all kinds of negative consequences.

We have character defects which rob *us* of our peace and often cause *others* we live and work with all kinds of stress and suffering.

On a global level, we witness much suffering because of terrible, sinful choices made by individuals, leaders of nations, and ethnic and religious groups.

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 us all human robots, but I doubt any of us would vote for that solution.

Reason #2: We live in an imperfect, evolving world.

The *Catechism* states that 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 a good thing to often pray for all engaged in scientific and medical research, that their discoveries (and their responsible application) will help us to enjoy life more fully on earth.

In the meantime, we live with "pockets of chaos" that can cause us humans immense suffering, e.g., earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis, etc. Yet in the past fifty years, enormous strides have been made to help protect ourselves against such calamities. Because medicine is an imperfect science, we must live and die of certain diseases. But here again, wonderful advances have been made in this area and in many other areas that impact the quality of our lives here on earth.

Jesus' response to suffering

God did not answer Job's question of *why* God allows bad things to happen to good people. Neither did Jesus. He did say that it was not a case of God punishing someone (Jn 9:1-5). 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 saying to sick people, "Put up with your sickness, it will bring you closer to God." Rather, we encounter 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. Of course, God will sometimes use sickness for a higher purpose to waken us up spiritually and/or to lead us closer to him. Yet, as I say this, I am also very 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 badly in this very important area of Christian ministry. We have made a few efforts to have a healing ministry at Ascension but, unfortunately, we could be doing much more.

Our response to human suffering

When it comes to coping with and responding to human suffering, I find the wisdom in the *Serenity Prayer* 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. For example:

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.*" Two people could have the same set of circumstances: a health issue, an imperfect work situation, an unhappy relationship. However, one person may have developed the skills and attitude to cope rather well with the situation, while the other person feels miserable.

We cannot change the fact that we have some permanent ailment or that a loved one has died, 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 help us to live happier lives. Fear of change can also keep us from doing things that could reduce stress in our lives.

Many 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 effectively with personal issues and to deal more effectively with people, especially difficult people. Going to 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 defects that add a lot of stress and emotional suffering to our lives. For example, we may have big egos that need 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 and 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, participating in some 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. Change usually requires great effort and some pain. Many people prefer to remain stuck in their dysfunction rather than face their woundedness and working for change. Often, people carry a burden of guilt for years for some past failure. A good confession, in most cases, would free us of that burden. But fear or pride keeps us from seeking the help we need.

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. A few years ago day, a woman shared with me how her faith is helping her to become more detached from material things during hard economic times. She and her husband had lost 50% of their investments. The loss could have gotten them angry, stressed, etc. Instead, it led them to become more detached from the material things in their lives.

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.

Of course, 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 a few years ago, 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 difficult periods in our lives.

“The wisdom to know the difference”

The *Serenity Prayer* asks that we discern what can and cannot be changed. Sometimes this is clear but sometimes 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 do not 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.

Faith, family and friends

In difficult times, all of us need the support of faith, family (biological and church) and friends. A parishioner struggling with cancer just left my office she witnessed to me how faith, family and friends have been a tremendous help during this very difficult period in her life. She has been pleasantly surprised that she has not been angry with God. She testified that being an active part of our church family has been so helpful. Often at daily Masses, I pray: “*For all who will receive bad news today, that they will have faith, family and friends to help them.*” If you have a testimony on this, please share with me.

Prayer of Serenity

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time;

Accepting hardship as pathway to peace;
Taking, as Jesus did, this world as it is, not
as I would have it;
Trusting that you will make all things right
if I surrender to your will;
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with you forever in
the next.
Amen.

(Reinhold Niebuhr)

Ash Wednesday begins a week from Wednesday which this year is also Valentine's Day, so we strongly encourage you to celebrate Valentine's Day the day before Ash Wednesday so that it does not interfere with your Lenten resolution or fasting.

Have a blessed week,

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