



Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time November 18, 2012 B

Does Everything Happen for a Reason?

The following article was written by campus minister Christine Marie Eberle.

A young woman sat crying in the rocking chair of my office. A junior in college, she was telling me the story of an awful night, four years past, that seemed to have changed her life forever.

Sadly, I don't have to worry that alluding to the story here will reveal her identity, as variations of it have been shared by far too many young women who have sat in that chair over the years. It was the story of a party and a boy, a closed door and a struggle. Even though it had been several years, she still felt ruined. The assault was affecting her on every level. A formerly faith-filled person, she was feeling more and more distant from God. Finally she drew a ragged breath and said, "I know that God makes everything happen for a reason..." and then the unspoken but hung between us as she struggled to make sense of what had happened to her.

Does God Make Everything Happen?

All her life she'd been taught that everything happens for a reason. Not in theology class, but in the everyday theology of ordinary people expressing their faith in a good and loving God. In her family and in her Church, people were always talking about "God's plan" and "God's will." The lesson she took away was that everything that happened was part of a divine plan.

This had worked for her for a long time. It had worked when she didn't get into her first-choice college and turned out to love her backup school. It had worked when the class she didn't want to take wound up being the place where she met her best roommate ever. But it wasn't working now.

She desperately wanted to believe that God had a master plan in which this seemingly senseless and awful thing was actually logical, necessary—even good. But the effort was straining her faith to its limit. God's ways might be beyond our ways, but how could God possibly want this? What good reason could there be? What lesson learned or character forged could be worth this anguish? And if this really was how God worked, how

could she continue to worship him? It was like her faith was a high-stakes math problem, and she just couldn't make the equation come out right.

I was a young campus minister at the time, but my pastoral response was born of passionate conviction and hard experience. Leaning forward until I achieved eye contact with her downcast gaze, I said, "Listen to me. If I thought for one moment that God wanted this to happen to you, I would not be on his payroll!"

She gasped, then laughed, and something in her seemed to loosen just a bit. As we talked over the next few months, her long-held theology began to shift. Eventually she was able to understand the assault as an evil act that violated something God held dear. Letting go of the idea that "God makes everything happen for a reason," she was able to turn to Jesus as the compassionate one who had also suffered in body and spirit and who longed to comfort her.

God Is Working in Our World

We all have things we say we believe about how God works in this world. These convictions may remain strong yet untested for many years. It's easy to talk about the mercy of God, for example, until someone does something unforgivable to a person we love.

It's easy to talk about the providence of God until a child we know loses a battle with cancer. But when life brings these hard realities home for us, we are forced to examine what we really believe. Do our convictions stand the test of tragedy, or do we need to open ourselves to a deeper understanding?

Such collisions between our professed theology and our lived experience can shake us to the core, but they can also be a profound gift. Either the things we say we believe are true even in the worst circumstances, or they were never true to begin with. What a blessing when we can dig down and discover which is which.

A classic example of this is the expression, "Everything happens for a reason." I have heard countless students profess this as a firmly held belief, so sometimes I'll ask them to explain it in other words. "If you couldn't use that sentence," I say, "how else would you express what you mean?" That's a good way to get at the underlying theology.

The beginning is usually very sound. God loves us; God wants what is best for us, and most important, God knows what is best for us. Because our imperfections and our limited vision make it impossible for us to know what is really good for us, we are well advised to surrender our days and our destiny into the hands of our loving God.

Most of us can tell countless stories to illustrate the soundness of this principle. A woman missed her flight, only to learn that the plane had a mechanical failure and sat for hours on the tarmac. A man did not get the promotion he wanted, but the position was soon eliminated because of the failing economy. A young girl was dumped by the dreamy guy who later turned out to be bad news.

In each example, it's easy to sigh and think everything happens for a reason and thank God for such loving protection. And because we can tell those stories, we hold on to the principle even when the happy ending has yet to be discovered. Everything happens for a reason, we may bravely profess in the face of disappointment or sorrow, and in faith we wait for God's good purpose to reveal itself. So far, so good. But as we can see from my student's experience, the more painful the tragedy, the harder we have to work to wrap our faith around it. And sometimes our faith just won't stretch that far. It has to bend, or it's going to break.

The Crisis of Faith

This crisis of faith is not a modern phenomenon. When we find ourselves struggling to understand God in the face of suffering, we are in very good company, as the conviction that God causes all the events of our lives for a benevolent if sometimes unfathomable purpose mirrors much of the theology in the Hebrew Scriptures.

This is expressed most poignantly in the Book of Job. Following the sudden destruction of his property and the death of all his children, Job exclaimed, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord!" (1:21). And again, following his own affliction by loathsome sores, "We accept good things from God; should we not accept evil?" (2:10).

Job's piety was mocked by his wife and challenged by his friends, yet there is a comforting equanimity in his words. How much more peace would we experience if we were able to accept both the apparent good and seeming bad in our lives as coming from the hand of God? Many centuries later Saint Paul wrote, "We know that all things work for good for those who love God" (Romans 8:28). Is this not the same theology?

Actually, it's not. Although sometimes we can look back and see the hand of God patiently leading us beyond what we thought we wanted to what was really good for us, and it doesn't make sense. And it never should, because "all things working together for good" is not the same as "God's causing all things for good." There is evil in the world and there is free will, and when the two get together, they tend to wreak indiscriminate havoc.

My student, for example, had been on the receiving end of the violent misuse of someone else's free will. Eventually she might have been able to see how God could draw good from what had happened to her. Rape crisis centers everywhere are staffed by people doing just that, and when they extend compassion to others from the well of their own pain, then grace abounds, and even awful things do work together for good. But there was no way she could reconcile the actual attack with God's desire for her life—and that is the crucial distinction. As long as her faith rested on the belief that "God makes everything happen for a reason," she was believing herself right into a crisis of faith. When we forget that God is not the only one making things happen, that's when everything happens for a reason falls apart.

A Profession of Faith

Let's return to the Book of Job. At the beginning of the story, when Job talks about receiving both the good and the bad from the hand of God, he is echoing the theology of his day. But readers of the Book of Job know something the afflicted man himself did not: that his suffering was not caused by God.

In a drama worthy of the daytime soaps, the Book of Job begins with "the heavenly beings" coming to present themselves before the Lord, with Satan among them. Satan, in this rendering, is like God's annoying buddy (the Eddie Haskell of the heavenly realm, for those who remember Leave It to Beaver). God indulges in a bit of bragging to Satan about his faithful servant Job, and Satan poses the very reasonable question as to whether Job—a prosperous man with a large and happy family—loves God or just God's blessings. God then gives Satan permission to test Job, which he proceeds to do—on a pretty grand scale.

Job's friends are convinced that his afflictions must be divine punishment for some sin. But Job knows something his friends do not: He has done nothing to deserve this. He knows what is happening to him does not fit his understanding of the God he worships. Far from being blasphemy, this conviction is actually a

profession of faith, because to look at something and say, “That’s not God,” we have to have a pretty solid understanding of who God is.

Consider the Holocaust or apartheid, genocide or September 11. In each of these cases, surely we know the victims did nothing to deserve their fate—that the will of God was thwarted, not accomplished—through these events. To acknowledge tragedy is not the will of God is to say something powerful about the goodness of God. But when we say everything happens for a reason and try to figure out how something patently horrible is really God’s desire, we are actually calling that goodness into question.

An Alternative Response

So what’s the alternative? If we cannot, in the face of tragedy, draw “God’s reasons” around us like a blanket, are we abandoned to the cold winds of chaos? By no means! Instead of shutting our eyes and placing our hope in reasons yet to be revealed, we can open them wide and gaze with confident trust at the God already revealed to us through the Incarnation.

In Jesus, God came to Earth, shared our skin, and entered fully into our blessed and broken humanity. The same Jesus who laughed with friends and turned water into wine is the tortured figure hanging on the cross, bereft of almost everything, having done nothing to “deserve” his fate except love and tell the truth.

When at times we feel like we are hanging there with him—when we, too, want to cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34), we are challenged to remain in the mystery. Instead of trying to rationalize away our pain with talk of reasons, we are called to stay with Jesus, who loves us and suffers with us. Even from the depths of despair, we are invited to make the words of Lamentations our own, “But this I will call to mind; therefore I will hope: the Lord’s acts of mercy are not exhausted, his compassion is not spent; they are renewed each morning” (3:21–23).

We are not alone, even in our darkest nights, because the God who did not want this for us is there with us, eager to make all things work together for our good. This God who suffers with us is the One to whom we really can surrender all. The God of the Incarnation weeps with us as we weep, and pours out the grace we need to move through tragedy to what lies on the other side. With mercies that are renewed each morning, our God holds us up and longs to draw us, step by halting step, to a future full of hope.

Have a blessed week,

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