

Stewardship Sermon Series: Giving Thanks... "For Suffering"
Salem United Methodist Church
Job 1:20-22, 42:1-5; Psalm 22:1-11; John 16:33-17:11; Romans 8:18-28
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In our national culture, November is the time of Thanksgiving, a time to feast and give thanks for our many blessings. However, in our Judeo-Christian tradition, giving thanks is part of who we are as believers. Traditionally, giving thanks is naming our blessings: food, shelter, family, health, jobs, country, etc. However, the Apostle Paul who predates our Thanksgiving celebrations by 2000 years stated that we are to give thanks in all things (I Thessalonians 5:18). In all things? Thankful even for the tragedies and sufferings in life? Last week we gave thanks for the questions we have in life because without questions we would never have answers. But why give thanks for suffering?

No matter where we look in the world, there is suffering. Globally, there are natural disasters. When a natural disaster, such as an earthquake, a tsunami, a hurricane, or a tornado strikes a populous area, it usually kills thousands of people and leaves thousands injured and homeless. Four years ago a magnitude 7 earthquake hit the populous and impoverished country of Haiti. 300,000 people are reported to have been killed. One and half million people were left homeless. In the Indian province of Kashmir this past September thousands of people were flooded out of their homes and businesses. Here in the United States we have had flooding, tornados, and fires that have wiped out whole towns. In West Africa the deadly Ebola virus outbreak has taken thousands of lives and is expected to take thousands more. 2.6 million children die each year from hunger related causes, according to Bread for the World. Also each year, somewhere between 600,000 to one million people die from malaria with hundreds of millions more reported cases. Then there is suffering closer to home. The prayer list that is on the back of our announcement page includes names of people who are suffering: some from depression, some from cancer, and some suffer in other painful ways. We know these people. We pray for them. We ask for God to alleviate their suffering.

Yet, as we consider our personal sufferings and the sufferings around the world, we ask these questions, "Why doesn't God stop these tragedies?" or "Why does God allow this to happen?" For some, these questions are game changers. There are people who can't believe in a God who allows suffering. For them if God really existed, God wouldn't allow suffering in the world. To not believe in God doesn't change suffering. It still exists. Those who don't believe miss out on the comfort that God offers us in the midst of our suffering.

God's original plan for the world did not include suffering. God created a world where everything was good. God created humans to care for the world. God gave us dominion over it, but we were not satisfied. We didn't recognize how good we had it. We wanted more, so we took what was not ours to take, the fruit from the tree of good and evil. Our eyes were then opened to both good and evil. With this knowledge we were given the freedom to choose between good or evil. The whole story of the Bible is about people choosing wrongly, messing up, causing suffering for others, oppressing others, harming others, choosing evil, and God offering to clean up our messes, God coming in and saving us. This is how God works in the world. God does not cause suffering, but God is with us in our suffering, offering comfort. And God can transform it into something good.

The biblical story of Job tries to explain suffering. Job is devoted to God. He is faithful. God and one who is from the heavenly courts have a conversation. This being of the heavenly court in the Hebrew text is called *ha-satan*. Christians have taken this term and transliterated it into Satan, God's opponent, or the personification of evil. But the Hebrew text uses the word, *ha-satan*, the one who is appointed by God to challenge humanity to make the right choice between good and evil. The *ha-satan* is to challenge Job. In the midst of suffering, will he remain faithful to God or not? Suffering happens to Job. He loses everything: family, livestock, land, slaves, and his health. Life just couldn't get much worse. His friends try to be helpful. They subscribe to the school of "just-desserts," that is if we are good then we will receive blessings from God. If we do evil, then God punishes. They saw Job's suffering as punishment from God. For all this suffering to happen to Job, he must have done something really wrong. Job defends himself by claiming his innocence and his faith in God. After listening to them, he states these words that Handel uses in the Messiah oratorio, "I know that my Redeemer lives and at last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19: 25-26). God responds to Job and his friends by letting them know that God is the one who created everything in the universe. In other words, God is greater than all things, including human suffering. Job responds to God in this way. He states that before his sufferings Job knew God from secondhand sources, but now because of his suffering Job knows God firsthand. God is made real to us in our sufferings.

God does not cause natural disasters to happen, or tragedies, or disease. God created this world to work in a certain way. Our bodies are flawed, so we contract viruses and cancers. We get sick. There was a time before modern science that illness was viewed as a punishment from God. Today doctors and medical researchers strive to fix what breaks in our bodies. Many of us are here today because of the knowledge of medical science. In regards to natural disasters, scientifically we can explain how earthquakes, hurricanes, monsoons, and tornados happen. There was a time when people saw natural disasters as a punishment from God, too. Today some would argue that we are having more natural disasters because of climate change. Setting that argument aside, God doesn't cause natural disasters to happen so thousands of people are killed. God is not a murderer. Thousands died in Haiti because they are poor and do not have the money to build homes that can withstand earthquakes and hurricane winds. Every year flooding from the rains occurs along the rivers in India. Politics and economics are part of the reason these people are not safe living along the rivers. Natural disasters happen. Ebola is spreading in West Africa because of lack of education about the disease and distrust of western medicine. Many disasters occur because humans have made choices out of self-interest. Often these choices are made with little concern to those who will be affected. So those who are powerless often suffer greatly because of the wrong choices, because of the sins of others.

Suffering is often caused by human decisions. The freedom we are given to make choices can often bring pain into our lives. We suffer from the consequences of our bad decisions. For instance, we drink and drive causing injury and suffering to others. Whole societies collectively make bad choices that destroy and cause harm. 60 million people died in WWII and all of Europe was destroyed by war because one person convinced a whole country that they were superior to everyone else. We can mention countless other times in which humans have collectively inflicted harm on others out of self-interest. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called these types of choices as being made in a godless world. He wrote from his German prison cell during WWII that as Christians we are "summoned to share in God's suffering at the hands of a godless world." What is a godless world? A world in which people make choices that are not made out of love or caring for others. This is the world we live in. It can be godless. But what is "God's suffering at the hands of a godless world?" How does God suffer? As a parent, we know that we cannot control every decision our children make. We can guide them and teach them, but once they leave the house, they have to make their own choices. We worry about the choices they are making. We can't stop them from making poor choices. When they make them and suffer the consequences, we suffer with our children. God suffers in a similar way that parents do. God has given us what we need to make the right choices, but God does not control our choices. God does not play chess with us, moving us like pawns across the chess board of life. Without the freedom of choice, we would be pawns on God's chess board. God would control every little aspect of our lives. This is what life would be like if God didn't allow suffering. We would have no choice. God would control our every move. It is not the will of God for bad things to happen. God does not cause bad things to happen for a reason, either. God suffers with us, like we suffer with our children.

God incarnate as Jesus the Christ experienced the injustices and sufferings of this world. He saw it in the people's eyes. He touched and healed to alleviate their suffering. And he experienced suffering first hand. He was tortured and experienced the worst execution known to humanity, crucifixion. He knew that his disciples would suffer because of their faith and they did. One was so ravaged with pain, he committed suicide. The rest were tortured and killed for their faith. Even in the midst of their suffering, Jesus tells them to take courage. He has conquered the evil in this world. He prayed for their protection as he faced his own suffering. That's who Jesus is-thinking of us before himself. Paul experienced suffering at the hands of others, too. He was jailed and tortured because of his preaching. Yet, he too believed that in the midst of suffering there is hope, that in the midst of suffering, God works at bringing good out of suffering. From Jesus suffering on the cross, we have the Resurrection, the hope of new life. God does work all things together for good for those who love God.

Suffering happens. We can get angry with God. Even in our suffering, we have choices. We can hold onto the bitterness and pain and be miserable, or we can allow God to enter into our suffering and find joy, hope, and new life. So give thanks in all things including suffering, because God can even take our suffering and transform it into something good.

Reflections Questions: Has there been a time in your life when your suffering was unbearable? How did God offer you comfort? How did God work all things together for good? Who do you know is suffering? How can you offer them comfort and hope?

Resources: *A Journey Through the Hebrew Scriptures* by Frank Frick; *Letters and Papers From Prison* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

