

5th Sunday of Ordinary Time B “The Problem with Pain”

Fr. Frank Schuster

As we go through life, there are haunting questions that we have difficulty in finding good answers. Why does a tornado hit one house but miss another? Why did a hurricane hit this town but not that town? Why do the Mariners never make the playoffs? Sometimes, we have no answers.

My friends, the readings this Sunday deal with a fundamental question we all have in the spirit life. Namely, why is there suffering and pain? We all have to deal with real suffering in our lives from time to time. One of the hardest questions atheists pose to people of faith is: if God is all powerful and all good, why did he create a world where there is suffering? Why can't God create a world without pain, if he is all good and all powerful? This is a question that all of us ask at some point, some of us more than others, as some people deal with the problem of suffering more than others. Again, how is that fair? Why do some people seem to coast through life with little suffering while others go through life experiencing immense suffering? If God existed, this wouldn't be the case, the argument goes. And every one of us here at some point has experienced suffering in one form or another. I think it is fair to say that we have people here today who are suffering right now, wounded at a deep level because of something going on in their life, that are here today seeking the healing that Christianity promises. If this describes you right now, the readings this Sunday are for you, especially that strange character we meet in our first reading, the man Job.

For anyone who has been afflicted with the problem of suffering, Job it seems is our patron saint. We can ask the question, what did Job do to deserve all the suffering he experienced? And the answer is, absolutely nothing. Quite the contrary, Job was an example of what is finest in the human race. His suffering is the result it seems with a wager between the devil and God: that even with the worst of suffering Job would remain faithful. In one fell swoop, Job lost everything, not because he deserved to lose everything but precisely because he didn't deserve to lose everything. He loses his livelihood, he loses his wife and family, he loses his health, and he loses his standing in the community. He loses everything. Job responds as faithfully as he can until finally he calls on God to account for why all this is happening to him. How many of us have found ourselves asking God, why me? He laments that life has become “a drudgery”! Job feels like the days pass slowly because of the pain while ironically life quickly slips by with the feeling of meaninglessness. He says that he has forgotten what happiness is. His words here are not sinful words of despair because he is directing his honesty to God in a search for an answer. This is an invitation for us to be honest with God in our prayer life, like Job and like the psalmists of old. Job gets his wish and God answers Job in an interesting manner. God gives Job some insight by asking him, “where were you when I made the stars in the sky, where were you when I created the day and the night”? How can you question me Job in this manner? At first glance we can think this is a cruel answer, but upon reflection, it is the right answer.

Bishop Robert Barron gives the analogy by inviting us to think of a large novel like “War and Peace” or “A Tale of Two Cities”. Now imagine one page of that book being ripped out somehow and imagine it floating in the wind until it lands at our feet. Imagine now that only one

paragraph of that page is readable to us. Now, that paragraph may be romantic or that paragraph may be violent. We can ask ourselves, is it fair to judge the whole book by only what you read in that one paragraph? The question also becomes, would the book as a whole become less than what it is without that paragraph?

The point Bishop Barron is making is this: our lives are but one paragraph in God's book of the universe. Without access to the whole book, we can't make a fair judgment on the rest of God's creation. It is also true to say, that unless the paragraph of our lives is in God's book, the story God has written is less than complete. Like Job, we wonder about why we experience suffering. Like Job, we don't have access to the rest of the story. Like Job, we were not present when God first created the stars in the sky. Like Job, however, the story God has written for this world is not complete without my life being part of the story. Like Job, God demonstrates that our suffering has meaning by remaining accessible to us, even when all we have to go on is faith.

What is the answer to Job's question, we now ask? Enter our Gospel reading. What do we find? We find hundreds of Jobs coming to Jesus for healing. And Jesus heals many of them. I bet many who missed Jesus by five minutes or so went away asking, why not me? Why wasn't I healed too? And don't we find ourselves asking the same question at times: whether we have been afflicted with a terrible diagnosis of disease in a loved one or even ourselves, or we have been given notice that our job has been terminated, or that the future we had hoped for has been suddenly put on hold or even lost, we can find ourselves asking the question: why did that tornado hit my house? Why are other people spared while I am not?

But if we reflect on Jesus' healing ministry, we must recognize that every person Jesus healed or raised from the dead eventually suffered and died from another ailment. The last time I was in the Holy Land I opened the phone book to find Lazarus' phone number. He wasn't listed. For all those who were healed or were resuscitated from the grave, the end of the story is that these good people eventually ended up dying from another ailment, like we all do. I mention this because it is important to recognize that when Jesus healed, it wasn't for the purpose of healing in and of itself. The purpose of Jesus' healing ministry was to give a sign to the human race that God is in charge. Even in the midst of our suffering, God is still in charge of his creation. When we are blessed with being healed from an infirmity, this isn't because God loves us more than someone else. This seems to be the case with Peter's mother in law. When she was healed, she didn't crown herself queen, she simply got up and starting serving others as if they were more important than herself. We are still left with the question however, why is there suffering in our world in the first place?

The doorway to an answer to this question may not be satisfactory to some at first glance, but there it is. There it is, right there, the cross. That is the doorway for understanding the meaning of suffering. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that all who believe in him will not die but have eternal life." God comes to us in Jesus Christ as a healer, to be sure. He goes about this by demonstrating in his own body that God is in solidarity with us in our suffering. God is in solidarity with us in our pain. When we weep in our own Garden of Gethsemane, God is right there on his knees next to us, taking into himself our suffering, our physical pain, our psychological pain, and our existential pain. God is truly Emmanuel in Jesus Christ. God is truly with us in every way that matters.

And so, where does suffering fit into the reality of human existence? Enter in one of my favorite books, “Man’s Search for Meaning” by Victor Frankl. I mentioned him a few weeks ago, but I thought it would be good to spend a little more time with him. Frankl, you may recall, was a Jewish psychiatrist during WWII who like so many others were taken to Auschwitz, a place of unimaginable suffering. Frankl spent years in the concentration camps. The suffering, as you know, was the worst imaginable. Every day, he wrote, it was literally a struggle to survive. During his time there, how did he get by day by day? He says he preoccupied himself with the question Job was dealing with, namely, how does a man find meaning in life in the face of such suffering?

Through the powers of observation that he had obtained from his profession as a psychiatrist, he was able to categorize two different groups of inmates in the concentration camps. One group of inmates defined the meaning of life to the expectations they had for the future, that they would get their family back, their job back, and their life back. This is perfectly reasonable at first glance, prolonging their lives by focusing on a future expectation and working towards it. It sounds like every self-help book I have ever read. The trouble with this strategy, however, was once word got to them that their family had perished in another camp or that they simply lost hope that their lives would return to normal once the war was over, many of these inmates lost the will to live. Because their expectations for the future had been dashed, life ceased to have meaning for them. Once this happened, many of these inmates were dead within a week. Frankl noticed how this pattern repeated itself over and over.

Frankl then categorized another group of inmates who didn’t link the meaning of their lives to future expectations, however reasonable those expectations were. For these inmates the question that kept them going through all the suffering wasn’t, “what do I expect out of life”? The more profound question that kept them going was, “what does life expect out of me, in this moment I find myself in”? What does life expect of me? This second question, this second approach to seeking the meaning of life, kept the inmates alive longer because now the problem of suffering and pain can have a place in the question of life’s meaning. Rather than focusing on a selfish motivation, however reasonable, the better question was, in my suffering in the here and now, what does life expect of me? Victor Frankl concluded that this was a better question when searching for the meaning of life, and he encourages us to consider during the ups and downs of our lives, no matter where we find ourselves, the better question, the one that opens a window into the meaning of suffering is: what does life expect of me in this moment, in the here and now?

Personally, the way I look at things is like this: if there weren’t such things as pain and suffering, would we be able to love the way we can love? Think about it. The very existence of pain and suffering, it seems to me, and the seeming randomness of fate from our perspective, makes us love our family and friends, and life itself for that matter, more than we would otherwise. If there was no possibility of loss, if there was always a tomorrow, we would take our relationships and our very existence for granted. Now, Jesus summarized the meaning of life with loving God and loving neighbor. If our vocation is to love God and love neighbor, if that is what we are meant to do in this life, I don’t think we could do this very well, as we are capable of, without the reality of suffering and loss. Like the pagan poets of old suggested, the gods envy

the human race precisely because we can love in a way an immortal can't. Mortality offers us the opportunity to learn how to love and love intensely. I think there is truth to that.

Meanwhile, I think it is helpful to remember that when we pray to God or through our patron saint to be delivered from suffering, this is a good and worthy prayer. It is also good to keep in mind the saints' perspective. They live in perpetual light. They forever see the book of life God has written from front page to back. They know the full story when we only know one paragraph. The angels' and saints' point of view is like the last verse of Amazing Grace, "when we have been there 10,000 years bright shining as the sun, we have no less days to sing God's praise than when we first begun". That is the perspective of the angels and saints. That is God's perspective when we pray to Him in our suffering. Everything in life is just a preparation for everlasting life. Everything we experience in life, our joys and our sorrows, our blessings and our struggles, are all a preparation for everlasting life.

Here is a radical thought. What if the meaning of life really isn't about the goals and expectations we have for the future? What if the meaning of life is more about the choices we make in the moment, how we demonstrate our love for God and neighbor during the good times and in bad, no matter what happens to us in life? What if the answer to Job isn't a false expectation of the future but rather an invitation to live up to life's expectations of us in the here and now? You see, God comes among us as a teacher and healer in Jesus Christ. The real revelation is that Jesus Christ is our savior. In our suffering and in our pain, we see God on his knees with us in the Garden of Gethsemane. We see Jesus' solidarity with the human race in his passion, death and resurrection. A consideration for us in the spirit life can be this: when we unite our suffering to Jesus' passion, death and resurrection, the problem of pain now has an answer.