

5th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Job and the Problem of Suffering”

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My friends, the readings this Sunday deal with a fundamental question we all have puzzled over at some point. Namely, if there is a God 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? 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 that happened in their life, who are here today seeking the healing that Jesus 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, nothing. Quite the contrary, Job was an example of what is finest in the human race. His suffering is the result it seems of 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. He laments that life has become “a drudgery”! 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. I think this is an invitation for us to be honest with God in our prayer life, like Job and like the psalmists of old.

What is the answer to Job's question, we now ask? Enter our Gospel reading. What do we find? We find a hundred “Jobs” coming to Jesus for healing. Wherever there is the most suffering, Jesus wants to be present. This is why I believe the cross may be the best answer to the problem of pain because it reminds us in our moments of suffering that God is in solidarity with us. 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. Because of Jesus, God is truly with us in every way that matters. What this also tells me is, if Jesus is willing to suffer and die for us, then the suffering we experience in this life also has a purpose.

Personally, the way I look at things is 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 possibly could 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 without the reality of suffering and loss. Do you? Mortality offers us the opportunity to learn how to stretch our love and love intensely precisely because every moment matters. The process of growing in our capacity to love and to be loved is the same thing as growing in our capacity for heaven because, as the bible tells us, God is love.

Which brings me to a radical thought. What if the meaning of life really isn't about feeling good all the time? Imagine that. What if the meaning of life isn't really about accomplishing all of our "goals" either? What if the meaning of life is more about growing in our capacity to love; specifically, growing in our capacity to love God and our neighbor in good times and in bad, no matter where we find ourselves, no matter how we are feeling each day? Again, the cross is helpful for our meditation. This is because the cross reminds us that, when we unite our suffering to Jesus' passion, death and resurrection, Job's question now has an answer.