

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Y6, M3 BCP Readings
20c
5 Epiphany (Year B) 11:00 a.m., 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m. Eucharist
Sunday 4 February 2018

2 Kings 4:18-37
Ps. 147:1-11,
1 Cor. 9:16-23
Mark 1:29-39

Connections We Cannot Make

"The Lord... heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. He counts the number of the stars and calls them all by name..." (Psalm 147).

I love my friend David like a brother. I remember driving with him once. He told me that in the last five years something had happened to his faith. He said, "Malcolm, I'm not sure I believe it anymore." "What don't you believe?" I asked. "Any of it," he replied, "heaven, a god who made the world and sees what we do and cares about us. I'm not sure that the world has any meaning at all. If there was a god, why is there so much suffering?"

In our Old Testament reading a Shunammite woman has such absolute faith in God that when her only child dies she tells no one, not even the boy's father. She believes with such conviction that God will restore her son. And God does. My friend David asks, what happens when the child does not come back to life?

I will always associate this biblical story with a moment when I really felt the presence of God and it scared me. It happened during a bible study with my friend Sheila. As we read this story of the Shunammite woman I was trembling. I remembered visiting her forty-year-old daughter in the hospital less than four years earlier. Like the Shunammite woman Sheila had also trusted God and asked for help.

But Karen, her daughter the one she loved more than life itself, never recovered. As we read the Bible there was a heavy silence in the room and we wondered what Sheila would say. For me Sheila is a kind of saint. Through terrible years she continued to bring so much love into her church. So why do David and Sheila draw such different conclusions about God and tragedy? In this year of truth what is the truth about suffering?

They both have very different pictures of Christianity. My friend David requires Christianity to offer a reason for why everything happens. He talks as if its primary purpose is to defend God's actions. For him suffering is evidence that God simply does not exist. Perhaps David imagines God moving us around like a cosmic chess player. Maybe he imagines God's act of creation as one of choosing from an infinite number of

possible worlds, one without mosquitoes, another without cancer, or one without Twitter.

David sees suffering and pleasure in an absolute sense as if it were possible simply to measure the amount of each, put them on the scale and see which was greater. In his eyes suffering outweighs the good. Because of this he cannot accept God.

One primary difference between David and Sheila is that David is seeking the truth alone (on the basis of what he hears about God outside the church). Sheila on the other hand is part of a community of people who are sharing their experiences, loving God and trying to heal the world.

The god who controls everything like a cosmic puppeteer is the god of some ancient Greek philosophers. It is emphatically not the God of the Bible. From the very beginning, Christians have regarded death not as necessary for a greater good but as God's enemy. In the book of John Jesus says about his crucifixion, "Now is the judgment of the world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (Jn. 12:31-2).

Suffering, evil and pain are not the work of God although at times they open us to see God's grace. The Bible inspires us to heal suffering whether we encounter it in poverty, loneliness, racism, psychological illness, violence or even in arguments that our life has no meaning. The story of Jesus is about how God desires to heal us so badly that he will suffer terrible pain and betrayal in order to have a relationship with us.

Human beings are tormented not just by what we have loved and lost, or by the pain that we have suffered or witnessed. Our imagination causes us pain. We are troubled by what was and by what never came to be. The stories we tell about suffering magnify or heal it.

The real issue is the pain that we are responsible for both in ourselves and in others. The real question is do we contribute to the world's joy. On this earth we do not experience suffering or joy in absolute quantities. Our actions and our consciousness magnify them.

When my son Micah was one year old, I took him to an exhibit of photographs by Edward Weston (1886-1958). Weston lived in Carmel during the first half of the twentieth century. At the time we lived in Boston and it was a miserable winter day with gray skies and freezing rain falling onto dirty snow. The trees had no leaves. There was nothing green outside at all.

As he slept in the stroller I wandered through the exhibit. There were so many beautiful pictures of California. At first I felt a little homesick. Weston had photographs from Monterrey of pines, cypress bark, rocks and beautifully shaped sand dunes. But he also had more surprising pictures: close ups of the twisting skin of peppers that looked sensual like a human body. He showed the geometrical perfection of an artichoke that had been cut in half.

The strangest images of all were pictures of a toilet. He made it look breathtakingly beautiful. When we left the exhibit the world had been transformed. That whole afternoon I could look at the most ordinary things and see tremendous beauty. Our life can be like this. It can open up to deeper levels when we pay attention.¹

In today's reading the apostle Paul writes, "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some." I used to think that this meant that Paul was a fake, that he pretended to be something that he wasn't. But since then I have come to see this in an entirely different way.

For Paul, those who do not believe in Christ see differences between people as irreconcilable. They regard the difference between Palestinians and Israelis, black people and white people, skaters and jocks, parents and teenagers, as if these differences are the most important thing about us. I think that what Paul means is that in Christ we do not have to be cut off from each other, we do not have to continue to harm or be harmed by each other. God invites us into a new kind of life that will give us power over suffering. Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury says, "God is in the connections that we cannot make."²

Christian de Cherge (1937-1996) was a Trappist monk in Algeria who dedicated his whole life to building bridges between Christians and Muslims. In 1993 when Islamic radicals grew in power he and his fellow monks had the chance to flee the country. Instead they chose to risk their lives so that they could continue their work. Three years later de Cherge was beheaded by militants.

He left behind a letter to his family in which he expressed his fears that his death would be used to condemn the people of Islam whom he loved. In it he writes, "Obviously, my death will justify the opinion of all those who dismissed me as naïve or idealistic... But such people should know that my death will satisfy my most burning curiosity. At last, I will be able – if God pleases – to see the children of Islam as He sees them illuminated in the glory of Christ, sharing in the gift of God's Passion and of the Spirit whose secret joy will always be to bring forth our common humanity amidst our differences. I give thanks to God for this life, completely mine yet completely theirs [also] to God who wanted it

for joy against... all odds... And to you, too, my friend of the last moment, who will not know what you are doing. Yes, for you too, I wish this thank-you, this "A-Dieu," whose image is in you also, that we may meet in heaven, like happy thieves if it pleases God, our common Father..."³

The twentieth century theologian Paul Tillich argued that sin is not a particular immoral act like killing or stealing. Instead sin affects all of us all the time as the state of disconnection which he calls estrangement. We are cut off from the God who we were created to intimately know. We feel isolated from each other.

Perhaps the most important thing that Tillich ever wrote was a short sermon called "You are Accepted." His point was that, in the words of the Bible, "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ" (Rom. 8:39). We cannot earn God's love by being good or by believing in him. God loves us no matter what we have done and no matter who we are. After Tillich's death his family found a copy of this sermon in his desk in which he had written a dedication, "to ME."⁴

In conclusion, many of us at times feel tempted to believe more in a god of power than our God of love. But whether it is through a photographer of toilets or a friend's difficult question God shows us many ways to bring more beauty and love into the world. Jesus, the crucified and the Holy One of God, with his children Christian de Cherge and Paul Tillich struggle together against suffering and death. The God of infinite connection is with us and invites us to share in joy.

I asked my friend Sheila if I could talk about her story. This woman who lost her daughter said, "above all tell them that God loves them and that this love can lift them up even in the darkest moments of their lives."

Let us pray: O most holy God you bring us into connection with yourself and each other. We pray that your care will always be felt by those who know you and those who do not yet see you. We ask this in the name of your son who died so that we can love. Amen.

¹ In our lives we can choose to see beauty and bring love into the world or we can deny them. We can take the suffering that we feel and make other people suffer too. So why do we fail to see the truth? Why do we experience and cause suffering? Why does God often seem so distant from us? The world surfing champion Kelly Slater was on his way to the contest that could give him his next championship. As the plane taxied down the runway he kept sending text messages on his cell phone. The passenger next to him told him that it would interfere with the plane's electronic systems. Slater felt tempted to in his words "be a punk" and swear at the man, but he didn't. Instead he turned his phone off and they had a long conversation together. Afterwards, Slater realized that this change in attitude was a turning point for him and even contributed to his victory. Loving better helped him become a better surfer.

² Cited in Stanley Hauerwas, *Cross-Shattered Christ: Meditations on the Seven Last Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004) 39.

³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴ Anne Foerst, *God in the Machine: What Robots Teach Us about Humanity and God* (NY: Dutton, 2004) 178.