

## **BYOB (Bring Your Own Brain)**

### **Why Suffering**

July 30 & 31, 2011

A Pentecost 7

Loosely based on all texts: Isaiah 55:1-5, Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21, Matthew 14:13-21

My sermon today relies heavily on a couple of Care Note booklets, especially, *When Someone's suffering or death makes you question your faith*, by Peggy Ekerdt. I have set a number of these resources out by the candle stand for you to take.

It's good to see you all and to be back from vacation. It's always **good to go and it's always better to come home.**

This is our 8<sup>th</sup> week in our BYOB series. **BYOB Bring Your Own Brain.** When I'm giving pastoral care, leading Bible study or in casual conversation too often I discover people of faith, being the good Christians they are, are afraid to question or reason or explore their world. Somewhere along the line, we came to believe that to be a good Christian is to accept everything in blind faith. **Yet the Bible is full of questioning, struggles, even laments and anger thrown at God and God does not wince.** I'm basing each week's sermon on questions you wrote last May. (*Read questions :*)

*#1 Why do bad things happen to good people? I seem to be facing this more often and need help understanding why and what to do to find comfort. #2 Why does God not answer my prayers and lets bad things happen in my life.*

Behind each question is the assertion—we are good people, so why? Why is this happening? Does God care? Is God listening? Is there hope? Is God there? If we are good and God is good, what are we to do with suffering?

Why? Ultimately we don't know. We know that this is a fallen world and we know about original sin but “why” remains a mystery. I wish I could tell you more but ultimately the answer is—it's a mystery. But faith teaches us a number of ways we can respond to this fallen world and that's what I am going to talk about this weekend.

#### **1) First of all don't avoid the pain.**

It will not go away if you ignore it or hide it.

Allow yourself to ask questions, cry the tears, accept the confusion, feel the anger and admit the fear.

There are times in all of our lives when our own suffering or the suffering of those we care about forces us to look hard at what we believe.

We may even go through periods of doubt or disbelief.

The same thing happened to many people in the Bible, including the disciples. St. Augustine wrote, "Doubt is just another element of faith." so, if you have questions or doubts, stick with them, think about them and you will be led into a deeper faith.

If you find your faith shaken, know that this is the time that the faith of others will bear you up. The best place to take your doubts is to a faithful person. Join a Bible study. Talk to others who have "been there" and don't panic. All of this is natural to the grief process.

- 2) **Challenge the idea that the world is fair and righteous.** We do live in a fallen world. Life is not perfect. Life is not fair. This is a hard truth but it is the truth.

As a kid (1 of three daughters), we always had to divide special treats like gum and candy bars three ways. It never turned out even. When we complained it wasn't fair, Mom would say, "Exactly, but you all got a treat, right?" To a grade-schooler, it was a hard lesson.

Years later I learned a more difficult truth: Suffering and death are part of life. I spent 13 summers at a Y camp in the Ozarks. It was a beautiful location, on a blue lake created by a dammed stream.

At the edge of camp, on the way to the spill way, there was an old graveyard. The church or house that once claimed the cemetery was long gone but the camp kept it up.

It became a favorite spot because of its shade trees and flowers.

Many times I wandered through the grave stones, first as a camper and then as a counselor with her cabin of girls.

The tomb stones told the stories of difficult life in the 1800's. Several infants, some without names, were buried there and at least 2 whole families had died within weeks of each other, no doubt from a flu epidemic.

Culture tells us that it isn't so, but the truth is suffering is an unavoidable part of life...yet in the midst of suffering, God still exists.

Today's Bible lessons remind us of the same thing.

Without knowing the back stories, each text may appear to promise a life without pain. However take a closer look.

**ISAIAH 55:1-5**

*Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and... come and eat.* It sounds like a free banquet. The back story is that the people of God are in Exile. They have been taken away from their beloved Jerusalem and are living in Babylon. Babylon is about to fall and the people are imagining a return to Jerusalem...what God's love will look like in the future. Hope of the future with God is shining back into their present!

**PSALM 145:** This is a song of praise about the goodness of God. VS. 1 *The Lord is gracious and full of compassion.* Sounds good but then look closer at Vs 14 *The Lord upholds all those who fall and lifts up those who are bowed down* Notice God doesn't prevent the fall or the crisis, but he is there to support us, and to lift us up. This psalm is a good one for someone who feels like quitting.

**And our Gospel lesson MATTHEW 14 is the feeding of the 5,000.** Again the back story is important. John the Baptist has just been murdered and Jesus is in deep grief. Yet here he has compassion for the great crowd that has followed him.

These texts stretch our understanding of God. He is not an over indulgent parent or jolly Santa Clause. God is mystery and beyond our understanding. God's ways are not our ways (Is 55:8). Furthermore, pain, sorrow and suffering are a natural part of this life. Yet in the midst of suffering, God is still with us.

### **3) Look for blessings.**

Before I go any further, I want to be clear that God doesn't give us suffering so that something good can happen in our lives. That would be just mean. However, God can yank a blessing from even the worst pain or tragedy. He doesn't cause it but he can redeem it.

- a) Our loss can help us celebrate the small blessings in life. We can become more grateful.
- b) Our pain may make us more compassionate. It's not unusual for children who suffer abuse or poverty to grow up and become wonderful social workers or caregivers. People who knew poverty somewhere along the line are some of the most generous people I know.
- c) Our loneliness can open us up to new relationships and friendships. Just visit the VNA or any Sr. living community and you will discover all sorts of new friendship circles.

God does not will bad for us but God can bring good out of it. Of course this is the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Easter has power only because there was a Good Friday.

**4) Finally be patient. Remember that your story is not over.** There is no way around pain and suffering. We can't take a pill or say a prayer and it is magically gone. We simply have to acknowledge the truth of our situation and walk through it. This is hard for those of us who like quick results or to fix things for others, but all we can do is take the next step and then the next. Let the tears flow, let the anger rage appropriately, admit the confusion and allow help.

There will be good days and there will be bad days. It takes time.

**Remember also this is not the end of the story.** A high ranking US military officer was severely tortured 20 times in his 8 years as a prisoner-of-war. Years later, when asked about how he survived, he explained "*I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which in retrospect, I would not trade.*"

As Christians we are children of the Easter promise. The Bible says: ***If we live we live in the Lord and if we die, we die in the Lord. For if we live or if we die we are the Lord's.***

That promise of eternal life shines back, from the future, into our lives right now, giving us hope.

Yesterday, Alley and I attended the visitation for Tyler Baseman. The crowd was already circling Prince of Peace in Appleton. His casket was placed beneath the cross in the sanctuary. The weight of the family's grief is unbelievable but in their few words to me, it was clear that they knew this was not the end of the story for Tyler or for his family

Less than a half hour later I was at St. E's at the bedside of Irv Volkman, standing with his family as I spoke the words of the *Commendation of the Dying*. Together we placed Irv's future into the hands of God. We released him not to death but to the new life he will ultimately have in the kingdom of God.

Our story is not over yet. There is a future in Christ that gives us hope and purpose for the present.

In the meantime...keep praying; that is the topic for next week.

This is the good news of the gospel.