

“The Bible: Good and Evil”
Genesis 2:4b-7, 15-17; 3:1-8

The question about human suffering often haunts us as human beings. Why do we suffer? This is especially difficult when the suffering is completely undeserved. One of the things that religion often tries to do is to give an answer to this difficult question. One of the big challenges of this pandemic is trying to make sense out of it. One such attempt comes from the 1947 book, “The Plague” by Albert Camus. It has become a bestseller during the COVID-19 pandemic. Camus wrote a fictitious story about an outbreak of bubonic plague in Oran, Algeria, a Mediterranean coastal city of 200,000 souls. Camus based his story, in part, on an historical event: the 1849 cholera epidemic that devastated Oran. Camus showed some of our basic human patterns for responding to suffering and to a disaster. The first response was that of denial. The city leaders tried to calm the fears of the people by calling it a false alarm or a special fever. But when the numbers got high each day, the city officials took it more seriously. Then the author got into different people’s reactions and actions. One person tried to hire a criminal to smuggle him out of the city. Another person started “sanitary groups” to help keep things clean and to transport the ill to the hospital. Another person tried to commit suicide. During the early stages of the crisis, the priest in town gave a sermon in the cathedral blaming the scourge on people’s sinfulness and that it was God’s punishment on those with hardened hearts. But later on when the priest came to the bedside of a dying boy, his next sermon was about death being a test of faith for all believers. The main character in the novel was the town doctor who tried to help as many patients as he could. His perspective was to go to work each day without hope yet without despair, trying to do his best under the circumstances.

When Albert Camus was asked about the meaning of his story, he offered three ways to look at the novel. The first way is to read it in terms of historical events and how people behave in times of such plagues and that the goodness of humanity is often the greater pattern that emerges. The second way was about the evil of Nazism that was descending on Paris and the world. The third way was to read it as a parable about the perennial human condition of random suffering and how we need to do what we can to make it as palatable as possible.

One of the great themes of scripture is about dealing with evil and suffering. Today I would like to highlight an overarching theme which is affirming God’s goodness and presence in the midst of our brokenness and suffering. The context for our creation stories for today is the Babylonian Exile for the people of ancient Israel around the year 587 BCE. Because of their location in the Bible, we often think that the stories of creation were written first. But these stories were shared and written during the time of Exile for the people of ancient Israel. They were influenced by their experience of being forced to leave home because of their mistakes and disobedience to God's vision for their lives. In order to subdue them and destroy their national identity, the Babylonians sent most of them, especially the leadership into exile. In exile, the people of Israel had to re-examine their faith and their understanding of God's covenant with them. If we take the historical context of this story seriously, we see the value of it for our time. The context is that of suffering. The Israelites

gave a different reflection in Genesis than the Babylonians who believed that violence had a redemptive role in life. The Israelites affirmed the goodness of God and that only when we are reunited with God can we find our true peace. Rediscovering our connection to the source of original goodness does not eliminate suffering, but it gives us the strength to find meaning and to continue through life with love and hope.

The story hits hard on the theme of being created good and in connection to God, to each other, and to all of creation. Whenever we lose that sense, we suffer deeply. The stories of creation in the first three chapters of Genesis are about God's grace and love even as people mess up. The human struggle to know that God is with us even in our suffering is an essential part of our faith and its stories. What is interesting in this story is that God prepares Adam and Eve for the journey by clothing them. Even though God is not pleased with their disobedience, they are not left to fend for themselves. God sews clothing for them that are more substantial than the fig leaves they sewed for themselves. They had to leave the garden, but they did not leave without God's provision and love for them. We can't always explain why bad things happen, but we can always trust in the presence of God with us in all of our experiences. The illusions of shame and separation are healed when we become aware of God's care for us in the midst of our suffering. There is no mistake or mishap big enough to separate us from the love God (to quote Paul in Romans 8).

The stories of Genesis help us to get this truth according to Richard Rohr, "Whenever we fall out of right relationship with God and others, we no longer experience paradise. The breaking of the unity is the loss of the community, which is the sharing of life in honest, open companionship...We want to put ourselves first. We want to be independent. We don't want to admit our dependence on God."

One of the patterns we see in the Bible and on the spiritual journey is this: Orientation, disorientation, and reorientation or as Rohr puts it: "Order, disorder, and reorder." It is the pattern of human maturity. We are created in the image of God (being deeply connected to God), we lose our sense of that, but God helps us to mature into union with God and others. And this is a work in progress for us, a continual cycle. We are born innocent with a feeling of connection to all, but when we grow up, we feel separate and get wounded and then we wound others. The healing and transformation come to us not by going back to that state of innocence. Instead healing comes when we allow God to help us find a higher wisdom for living life. Even as we see the pain and the suffering, we are aware of the presence of God and can access that source each moment or at least each day. This does not resolve the contradictions and challenges of life. It instead embraces them through the power of God. Instead of having to classify things or people as good or evil, we rise above and see them from the perspective of God's love. The focus shifts to healing and presence instead of fixing and managing.

E. F. Schumacher once wrote this about the ability to reconcile opposites through the power of God about dealing with our struggles with children:

“Through all our lives we are faced with the task of reconciling opposites which, in logical thought, cannot be reconciled. . . . How can one reconcile the demands of freedom and discipline in education? Countless mothers and teachers, in fact, do it, but no one can write down a solution. They do it by bringing into the situation a force that belongs to a higher level where opposites are transcended through the power of love. . . . Divergent problems, as it were, force us to strain ourselves to a level above ourselves; they demand, and thus provoke the supply of forces from a higher level, thus bringing love, beauty, goodness and truth into our lives.”

In a way, that is what happens at the table of Christ. All of us are invited with our goodness but also with our faults. Those of us who have been on the journey a long time and those of us who are just starting. We experience a sense of unity with God and with others. When the simple elements of bread and cup are shared with an intention of connection, we transcend the limits of our personal experiences to be embraced by the power of the divine which embraces all of our suffering and contradictions.

Lectio Divina Roman 8:38-39 as our call to communion

38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.