

Sermon: "What Is Our Response to Suffering? "
(Luke 17:11-19, "God's Problem: by Bart D. Ehrman)

By. Rev. Peter E. Bauer

The other day as I was on my way to work, my cell phone rang. It was an Army JAG Officer who wanted me to advise him regarding a female Soldier who was seeking an Abortion. Apparently, she was being screened for overseas duty and the pregnancy was going to preclude her going. The Army attorney wanted me to answer the question whether she could go or not. I referred him back to the Medical Officer and referred the Army attorney to refer the Soldier to the Crisis Pregnancy Center here locally.

Just the other day, I got an E-Mail from a good friend. She has been out of work for some time now, has taken several contract jobs but things have not worked out. The most recent E-Mail I received informed me that her husband has now also lost his job due to the contract bid not being renewed. They are both now concerned about their financial stability and security and are concerned about possibly losing their house.

Human suffering is always out there, it's never far away. As The Grateful Dead use to observe:

" Cause, when life look like easy street, there is danger at your door. "

The danger that is human suffering can take a myriad of forms: One day you are feeling fine and then the next day you go to see your doctor and you receive a terminal diagnosis. Joan Didion in her poignant book "The Year Of Magical Thinking "chronicled her reaction to the death of late husband and writer John Gregory Dunne.

"One moment you're sitting there having dinner, and the next your husband dies Of a heart attack. "

What is the danger of human suffering in your own life? Maybe, it is an unwanted illness, maybe it is the physical and mental decline and the imminent death of a loved one, maybe it is the loss of a job, maybe it is the loss of a child or the loss of a marriage or a relationship.

Human suffering does not only encompass our own personal lives but it also embraces the collective life of our world. We witness the continuing war in Iraq and Afghanistan We witness the genocide of Dafur. We witness the continual brutality and oppression in Tibet. We continue to see those who are poor, those who are ill around us and among us. We continue to witness those who are suffering and who die from HIV infection and disease. We witness those who deteriorate, whose mental and internal memory of their world shrivel away due to the ravages of Alzheimer's Disease.

Bottom line, human suffering can feel totally devastating. We can feel totally overwhelmed, and immobilized and we can find ourselves agreeing, in the Words of Joni Mitchell:

“ nothing can be done. “

So what can we say about human suffering? What is our theological or philosophical or humanistic response? During the recent Compassion Forum, a reporter asked Senator Hillary Clinton the following question:

“How do you explain an all good and loving and knowing God allowing innocent people to suffer? “ Senator Clinton replied, after a thoughtful pause, “Well, that has been a question that has been dialogued and written about for centuries. When I meet God, I can’t wait to ask that question. “

I believe that there is real truth in that observation. There are days for all of us when we might find ourselves wanting to ask God, or the divine however known, why is it that people suffer? Why is it, as Billy Joel use to say, “Only the good die young? Why is it that we suffer?

Bart D. Ehrman in his very provocative and thoughtful book “God’s Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question- Why We Suffer “observes that different biblical authors had different solutions to the question of why God’s people suffer. The prophets thought that suffering came from God as a punishment for sin. Others thought that suffering came from God’s cosmic energies, who inflicted suffering precisely because people tried to do what was right before God. Again, others thought that suffering came as a test to see if people would remain faithful despite suffering. And still others believed that suffering was a mystery and that it was wrong even to question why God allowed it. And then there were still others who thought that this world is just an inexplicable mess and that we should “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die “while we can.

When we look at Jesus and his life and ministry, one response we get to the question of human suffering is with the story of the Good Samaritan. The writer lets us know that the stranger was assaulted, robbed and left for dead on the dangerous road between Jericho and Jerusalem. The story related that the priest and the Levite both abandon the man and his plight. It is only the Samaritan, the untouchable, the exiled, the excommunicated one who lends assistance and who tends to the suffering of the man.

In another story, once again from Luke’s Gospel, Jesus tells of entering a city and being greeted by ten men who suffered from leprosy. They stood at a distance and cried out with a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us. “ When Jesus saw them, he said, “Go and show yourselves to the priests. “ The story goes on to relate that as they went they were cleansed. One of the men, when he saw that he was healed, came back and acknowledged Jesus, thanking him. This man was a Samaritan. Again, we have the theme of the outcast, the untouchable being recognized, being described as faithful. Jesus then asks “Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner? Jesus then tells the man, “Rise and go, your faith has made you well.

What can we say about our faith, our beliefs, our own very life experiences and the whole reality of human suffering?

Bart Ehrman argues that he doesn't see how biblical answers to suffering i.e. a punishment for our sin, a portrayal of Jesus' suffering through our suffering etc. can be helpful in making sense of tragedies like that of the great influenza epidemic in 1918 or the bubonic plague in 1330. He believes that this isn't God who is creating excruciating pain and misery; it certainly isn't something human beings have done to other human beings; and he sees nothing redemptive in the innocent young child who contracts AIDS, through absolutely no fault of their own, and who can expect nothing but the nightmarish torments that the disease produces.

There has been the belief that God is like a good parent, a heavenly father, and that he allows suffering into our lives as a way of building our character or teaching us lessons about how we should live. In the book of Amos, for example, when God punishes the people for their sin, it is precisely as a kind of discipline, to teach them a lesson. That is why, according to Amos, the nation has experienced famine, drought, pestilence, war and death. God was trying to get his people to "return to me." (Amos 4: 6-11).

Bart Ehrman says that this view would make sense if the punishment were not that severe, the discipline so harsh. Are we really to believe that God starves people to death in order to teach them a lesson?

There is also the notion that the suffering experienced in this world is a mystery—that is, that it cannot be understood. In other words God ultimately had a plan that we cannot understand, at present, it is uncertain. But in the end we will see what happened, even the most horrendous suffering experienced by the most innocent of people, was in the best interests of God, the world, the human race and even of ourselves.

This notion can be comforting for people, an affirmation that God really is in control and really does know what he is doing. Bart Ehrman observes that if this is true, and he states that we will never know for sure until the end of time, he is not sure of this being a convincing point of view.

He cites the *Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky. The most famous chapter is entitled "The Grand Inquisitor". This is a parable told by one of the book's main characters, Ivan Karamazov, to his brother Alyosha, in which he imagines what it would be like if Jesus returned to earth as a human being. In his parable Ivan argues that the leaders of the Christian church would have to arrange to have Jesus killed again, since what people want is not freedom that Christ brings but the authoritarian structures and answers that the church provides.

Leaders of the world's mega churches need to sit up and take notice—leaders who much prefer providing the certainty of right answers to guiding people to ask difficult questions.

But there is also another excerpt from "The Brothers Karamozov" that is equally compelling. It occurs two chapters before and again Ivan and Alyosha are talking. Alyosha is described as being a bright but inexperienced young novice at the local monastery; he is deeply religious but still displays some naivete'. Ivan, his older brother, is described as an intellectual and as a skeptic. Ivan admits that he thinks God exists

(he is not identified as being an Atheist), but he wants nothing to do with God. The pain and suffering in this world are too great, and ultimately God is at fault. Even if God were to reveal at the end of time the secret that made sense of all that has happened here on earth, it would not be enough. Ivan wants no part of it. As Ivan says, “ It’s not God that I do not accept, you understand, it is this world of God’s, created by God, that I do not accept and cannot agree to accept.

He does not accept the world because even if God were to reveal at the end the one thing that made sense of it all, Ivan would still find the suffering in this world too horrible. Ivan finally observes that the suffering of innocent children cannot be explained, and that if there an explanation from the almighty is ever forthcoming, he simply won’t accept it. This is Ivan’s “rebellion. “ This is a far cry from the perspective of that Rev. Jerry Falwell and Rev. Pat Robertson who stated that the pain and suffering of September 11TH 2001 was due to the promiscuous lifestyle of Gays and Lesbians or of those who argued the same point regarding the pain and suffering of Hurricane Katrina as being God’s answer to the presence of sin and degradation of the people of New Orleans.

Bart Ehrman argues that there have been a number of theologians, including Arthur McGill author of *A Test For A Theological Method* (1983), who state that Christ is God’s solution to suffering, because in Christ God himself suffered. The idea that God himself suffers is based upon the theological view that Jesus was God and that since he suffered, therefore God suffered. But the view that Jesus was himself God is not a view shared by most of the writers of the New Testament. In fact, it is a view that is developed rather late in the early Christian movement. Bart Ehrman observes that it is not found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark or Luke-let alone in the teachings of the historical Jesus.

Moreover, Ehrman argues, if the Christian God is the one who suffers, then who is the one who created and sustains the world? Isn’t it the same God? By saying that God suffers with his creation, we seemed, according to Ehrman, to have sacrificed the view that God is sovereign over his creation. In other words, once again, God is not really God. And we are still left with the problem of suffering: why is it here?

The biblical view of human suffering that Bart Ehrman states best describes reality is that put forth in the book of Ecclesiastes. A lot of this world doesn’t make sense. As The Eagles once sang “Now I look at the years gone by, and wonder at the powers at be. I wonder why fortune smiles on some and lets the rest go free. “Things don’t go as planned as they should. A lot of bad things happen. But life also brings good things. The solution to life is to enjoy it while we can, because it is fleeting. This world and everything in it, is temporary, transient and soon to be over. We don’t live forever-in fact, we don’t live long. And we should enjoy life to the fullest, as much as we can, as long as we can. That’s what the author of Ecclesiastes thinks.

As much as I can appreciate the seductive power of this argument, I want to affirm that this is not good enough for me. I think it’s got to be more than “eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow we’ll die (with all due respect to William Shakespeare and Dave Matthews).

There is virtue and morality based in the assumption that we accept the fact that there is human suffering in the world and that there is a moral and ethical obligation,

Defined in the experience of God or the divine, however known, that we need to work at alleviating the suffering of others in our world, to alleviate the suffering of our own planet Earth and to be open to alleviating our own suffering through the experience of love and human interaction known in the religious community of faith.

As The Grateful Dead aptly observed “Once in awhile you’ll get to the light, in the strangest places if you’ll look at it right.” We can express this “Caritas “this charity in visiting a friend in the hospital, giving more to a local charity or a international relief effort, volunteering at a local soup kitchen, voting for political leaders who are truly concerned about changing the reality of suffering in the world than with their own political fortunes.

May we moved to love and to serve and to act on behalf of healing for ourselves, for our families, for our neighbors, our communities, our communities of faith and for our world, may we affirm that love and healing can overcome suffering now and always.

Shalom, Amen, Salaam, Blessed Be