

Psalm 111
Mark 1:21-28

“Suffering Love”
Communion
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R.P.C.
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In this Sunday’s text, Jesus enters the synagogue at Capernaum. He starts by doing some teaching there, but his teaching is interrupted by the shouting of a tormented man who had an “unclean spirit”, or as some translations say, a demon.

Few of us today take demons or demon-possession very seriously. We tend to write any kind of such irrational behavior as drug-related, drug-induced, or as some form of mental illness. However, we have a clergyman in our community who a few times a year gets a call from his denomination to participate in holding an exorcism. And while he does not report to having seen any demons, he will tell you he has seen and experienced demonic behavior that was healed by calling upon the name of Jesus Christ. He will tell you that it is always a frightening experience to see those powers of evil and good do battle.

Thus there is something in Mark’s account that I want us to take with greater seriousness: Jesus shows up in the middle of human misery and torment. And there in the middle of it all, he doesn’t explain away the pain; he doesn’t deny the pain - rather he works for healing and restoration. What that reveals to us is that God is not absent, but is always present and involved in the midst of our pain and torment, seeking restoration for us.

After his son died when his car plummeted into Boston Harbor, the late William Sloane Coffin, who once served as the chaplain at Yale, preached one of his most memorable sermons. He said in part: “When a person dies there are many things that can be said, and at least one thing that should never be said. The night after Alex died, a woman came by carrying quiches. She shook her head, saying sadly, ‘I just don’t understand the will of God.’”

“Instantly I swarmed all over her. ‘I’ll say you don’t, lady! Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper; that he was probably driving too fast in a storm? Do you think it is God’s will that there are no streetlights along that stretch of road?” “Nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn’t go around with his finger on triggers, his fist around knives,(or) his hands on a steering wheel. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths. The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, ‘It is the will of God.’ My only consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex died; that

when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all hearts to break.'"

Where was God when Alex drowned? Or for that matter, where was God during the tragedy of 9/11? It's the sort of question we tend to ask when trouble knocks on our door and it's our time of torment. Sometimes we ask "Why?" – "Why God?" But isn't it interesting that we so often follow that "Why" question with the question, "Where?" "Where is God?"

Some of our greatest minds have deeply pondered the "Why, God?" question. Some of those minds have come up with some plausible answers, but not entirely satisfying answers; other great minds have thrown up their hands, or have humbly confessed that there is really no great answer to "Why, God?"

Yet, behind the "Where was God?" question is the horrible assumption that maybe wherever God may be, God is somewhere; but God is far removed from us here. Here we are "down here" with our occasional or more than occasional troubles and miseries – which for some people among us seem to be unrelenting – and God is there – "up there." Does that mean God is powerless to assist? Does it mean that God is intentionally uninvolved? Does it mean that God just doesn't care?

We just heard William Sloane Coffin's reply: "When the waves closed over the sinking car, the first of all the hearts to break was the heart of God." But are those words enough? Is the consolation that those words try to bring enough? Is that Divine reaction enough, or should God have been proactive in not allowing the accident to happen in the first place?

Those words of "divine heartbreak" seem to have been adequate for this grieving father. God is love and God cares deeply. But God also gives wide berth for us to act freely down here, even when we stumble and choose to think or to act unwisely. Yet that same God doesn't stop loving us any more than earthly fathers cease loving their sons.

The challenge is to affirm, believe and understand that God does not cause wrecks or sickness, and at the same time NOT to say that God has been somehow responsible or irresponsible. God created this world, this world which is a difficult place for some people. What kind of responsibility does love normally assume?

God did not create us as puppets. We have at least some degree of choice and free will. We are finite, mortal creatures. And when we hurt, we are prone to weep; our hearts break. So don't ever love anything, much less anyone, if you don't want to risk the pain of loss. So to say "God loves" is to claim that God risks

loving us, and therefore must weep over our losses, because those losses are God's losses too.

Therefore, I think that Coffin was right to say that God grieved at the loss of Alex. But I think Coffin was saying even more – more about this matter of our suffering and God's love like we find in today's text. Where was God when Alex died? we ask. Well, where was God when Alex was born? Where was God each step of Alex's life? God was there ... God was there with Alex sharing God's love.

Time and time again in the Gospels, Jesus is confronted by people in pain, such as the man possessed with an "unclean spirit." Few people have had as deep an understanding of redemptive suffering as Simone Weil. A French Christian mystic, philosopher and political activist, Simone's life was marked by an exceptional compassion for the suffering of others. At the age of six she refused to eat sugar after she heard that the soldiers fighting in World War I had to go without it. She died from tuberculosis at the age of 34, brought on by refusing to eat more than the minimal rations that were available to the British soldiers during World War II.

She wrote in *Gravity and Grace*, "The extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering but a supernatural use for it." She also wrote that if we want to come close to God, we shall most likely do it through human misery, rather than through spiritual (or physical) pleasure. Indeed, she taught that "all pleasure-seeking is the search for an artificial paradise," which discloses "nothing except the experience that it is vain." She taught that only the contemplation of our "limits and our misery" raises us up to a higher plain.

Love is noted for its presence – its connection to the lover, to the beloved. "Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" writes the Psalmist in psalm 139. Where is God? God is here – especially in our times of misery and pain. How do we know this? If the greatest minds have pondered the "Why God?" question and come up short, how are we to know this? Or the answer to the question as to "where is God?"

We know it through Gospel accounts like the one we shared today where Jesus enters into a human life, showing up at worship where people bring their burdens and confusion and care. We know it through our own experience. Sure, I'll admit that nothing as wild and strange as a healing of a man possessed by a demon has happened here in our church on a Sunday morning. But I'll bet that something like that has happened to each one of us, even here.

Who of us has not come here one Sunday, perhaps silently shouting at Jesus because of some tragedy in our lives, or in the lives of someone close to us, or

even in the lives of some we have never met. And we have met him shouting right back to us, "I love you still." Where is God? Right here.

We think we know something of God's heart because of Jesus, and we do. Remember the story of Jesus and the death of Lazarus? Jesus learned of the death of his friend, Lazarus and what did he do? He wept. He also wept over the fate of Jerusalem. He grieved for Peter whom he knew would deny him, and he even had pity for Pontius Pilate who tried to wash his hands of Jesus' execution. Rather than lash out at those who crucified him, his heart broke for them. He died the way you and I die – only by a worse means in terms of suffering and pain. That's who God is ... That's where God is.

Christianity believes that Christ takes evil and suffering on God's own self on the cross of Jesus. Suffering is real. God doesn't cause suffering, we believe – God bears it. God risks a broken heart; and a victory that is God's resurrection is a victory that isn't complete until the end of time when 'every tear shall be wiped away' and God gets what wants for all of God's beloved children.

Where is God? Even Jesus cries out, "My God my God, why have you forsaken me?" But let's notice that Jesus calls God "my God." Thus God is not remote – "up there" in the hour of suffering. God is right there, close and caring, daring to intrude in our pain, taking all our shouts and cries and anger and embracing us still. Is this consolation enough? I think it is and I think it is true.

Today's Gospel reminds us that God does more than simply care. God does more than merely stand beside us in the darkness of despair. God powerfully reaches out to us; God rebukes the demonic evil that has thrown us in this horrible situation and thereby lifts us up. Sometimes God lifts us up by providing us with good friends who also show up, speak a word of compassion to us, and lift us up in ways we couldn't do for ourselves. This too we believe is a part of God's love.

In these first chapters of Mark's gospel, the writer surely means to show us that the cross of Christ wasn't just a one-time event for Jesus, but was part of his whole ministry. Jesus suffers opposition from humans and from demons alike who shout at him and curse him all throughout his ministry. Jesus suffers in his love for us. This is who God is. The cross is thus like a window into the heart of God.

God doesn't pull strings in our lives "down here." But that doesn't mean that God is absent. God is especially present during our times of suffering. There are likely a number of you here this morning who could testify to that fact.

When we suffer we want to get out of it and away from it as soon as we can. Jesus indicates that God is different from us in that God seems to seek out sufferers. God tends to wade into the suffering of others and suffer himself. That is very good news indeed, for it means when we suffer, we are apt to be very close to the suffering God. “My God, why have you forsaken me” – it’s there; right there we see God with us.

Years ago Karin gave me a cartoon of “Hagar the Horrible” in a frame. It depicts Hagar on a rock outcropping in the middle of the sea with his Viking ship on fire and sinking in the background. Hagar is lifting his head and outstretched arms to heaven, shouting, “Why God?” The second frame depicts a voice from the heavens responding, “Why not?”

At first glance that seems to be a rather flippant, uncaring divine response. But then it occurred to me that the voice itself is the revelation: The fact that God verbally responds means that God is near – God is present in the midst of Hagar’s suffering.

Where is God? Right here before us in this sacrament. Here we can ‘taste and see’ that God didn’t stay away to enjoy heavenly glory; but came and confronted and squared off with the worst evil the world could give: God won, and wins still. So take, eat and share ... share some of God’s suffering love. Amen.