

# SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

February 24, 2008

Text: Romans 5:1-11

Pr. Robert Goldstein

“Serious Nonsense”

What does it mean to believe in Jesus? I suppose, to some, asking that question in a church is preaching to the choir so to speak, that is, speaking to those who already believe.

And I am glad that I am speaking to those who do believe for many of you have gotten it right. You are our teachers too in your living faith. But that doesn't mean everyone here has gotten it right –or should I say, gotten it clear? Indeed we tend to forget like Israel in the desert, forget the promises of God for life, and so we gather together to be reminded, to “Do this in remembrance of me.”

Some of us are like the woman at the well. We are thirsty, but not for water. Like that unnamed woman we have a thirst beyond water –a thirst for life, for happiness, for forgiveness, for meaning and purpose, for enduring the challenges of life and especially of death that dry up our spirits.

Last Monday I had to put down my dear cat Buddy. He had very little kidney function left and had dropped from 16 pounds to less than 9. But now he has gone. He was a great and calm soul and a great mentor of kittens. But he is gone and my spirit is parched, dried up. Why did Buddy have to suffer and die like this?

Now if you feel for my anguish; if you feel that you can help me just by listening to my hurt; if you feel you want to hug me –then don't be intimidated by these feelings. You have it right! That's something of what it means to believe in Jesus! It is not a matter of words but how we live.

When we cry out thirstily “why the suffering?” we can be tricked by our habit of solving problems in life. Why is there no electricity? Let's check the switch. And in the same way we think there is an answer to the suffering question. This is

philosophy –of the worst kind, by the way. It even has a name since the 19<sup>th</sup> century: theodicy –the attempt to justify the ways of God.

I have to tell you, bluntly, as I told learned professors of Princeton, that the question “Why does God allow suffering?” is a nonsense question and a nonsense quest. It is not that we can justify or cannot justify the ways of God in regard to the terrible human suffering on this planet. It is just a nonsensical use of words. They laughed at me in Princeton. But now I am having the last laugh –if you could call it that..

Last Tuesday on the program “Fresh Air” on National Public Radio a colleague of mine in the doctoral program at Princeton, Bart Ehrman, whose work we have studied in adult forum, was promoting his new book, “God’s Problem.” Dr. Ehrman confesses, “I could no longer explain how there can be a good and all-powerful God” given the misery and suffering in this world. He has left the faith. I wouldn’t be surprised if Dr. Ehrman’s frustration and deep thirst are the result of that learned Princeton theodicy speculation he was taught! This is where theodicy ends up because it draws people away from the commonsense of the ordinary Christian life into a labyrinth of abstract argumentation. There is no living water in that labyrinth –just parched despair.

When I assert that theodicy is a nonsensical question this is not some impatient emotional remark, but a logical one. Yes, I studied logic theory at Yale so this is no naïf talking. But it is not easy to show this truth of faith, of what it means to believe in Jesus, but I will try.

When I say that asking why God allows suffering is nonsensical I do not want to suggest that I dismiss it. On the contrary. I am very concerned with someone suffering this pain, as I have suffered all week going home to a house without Buddy and going home to an Australia without my mother. I am very concerned, but academic speculation cannot deliver.

Instead I regard the nonsense of “Why does God allow suffering?” as

**serious** nonsense. I mean by the word “serious” that someone who asks that mistaken question is usually speaking from the depths of their soul. And if my colleague Dr. Ehrman had left behind the academic labyrinth about theodicy and gone into parish ministry, if he were humble and open to its commonsense, he would have learned by observation, by the movement of the Holy Spirit, that the real-life uses of that question require a different methodology –a pastoral one.

And what is that? To listen to the pain, not the theory, of that question. To express empathy for that suffering person. To hug that person, if appropriate. To let that person know that we care and proffer help that is realistic. And you know what? As time goes by, the measure of whether the person has been healed of their deep pain is revealed by whether the question has any hold on them any more. Job was written to tell us that the so-called problem of God and suffering is not answerable –it cannot be –any more than  $2+3=7$ . Rather the problem is deeply resolved and dissolves away as the person moves into healing. That’s part of the life and language of believing in Jesus. It has nothing to do with metaphysics. It has to do with concrete human life in community.

When we grasp the commonsense concrete truths of faith we can focus on those who suffer in other ways –like the Samaritan woman. She is suffering, is deeply thirsty, because of prejudice against her race and gender as well as her restless personal life. Jesus speaks to her, breaking all those boundaries that impose suffering, not only because he was a deeply ethical Jew, but because Jesus shall heal her deeply. And he begins her healing process and she begins to have a Savior, a healer.

We bring unnecessary suffering upon ourselves when we think our minds alone can grasp God. But we cannot. Rather first learn silence rather than clever questions. Then learn to behold what is already in front of our noses. Learn to see humbly what goes on in the religious community on its terms and not ours.

We do not justify the ways of God to humankind but we instead are justified

by faith in Jesus Christ, as Paul says, and “we have peace from God.” This is not an active theoretical argument, but a living passive discovery of God’s Spirit already working in our hearts and minds. Paul calls it a working of God’s grace so that suffering is seen in a new light:

*Our suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

But, thanks be to God, many of you know the truth to what I am struggling to say because you have been drinking that water of eternal life. You have known that healing even as you have shared that water of life with others, bringing them hope and help too.

But many people don’t know the power of the language of Christian faith and are drawn away to the arid language of academic speculations, theologies and arguments. And this is a great challenge today in our Western culture as Bart Ehrman shows. It demoralizes people who are Christians and drives others away from discovering the Spirit. My calling ahead of me is to use my heart and brain and what little wisdom God has given me to restate the intellectual ground of our faith to a muddled Western world –a faith which the Catechism puts it so well:

*I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to Christ; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with Her gifts, sanctified and kept me in true faith.*

Help me stay within Christian commonsense as you live concretely the faith God has given to you in your sufferings as well as in your joys. The struggles for justice still need us just as the struggle for the intellectual truth of our faith in this post-modern world. For that truth is not words. That truth is the living Word, Jesus Christ in whom we have been baptized and healed of our sufferings through blows of life and death. Amen

St. Francis Lutheran Church  
152 Church Street, SF, CA 94114-1111  
Phone: (415) 621-2635; Fax: (415) 621-8819  
E-mail: [StFrancisSF@sbcglobal.net](mailto:StFrancisSF@sbcglobal.net)  
[www.st-francis-lutheran.org](http://www.st-francis-lutheran.org)