

Whenever I visit The Children’s Hospital and see those innocent and brave little people struggling with a variety of serious health concerns, I want to scream to the heavens: Why? Why do children have to suffer so? I should know better. I know it is the wrong question. But there are situations in life that boggle the mind, confound the imagination and absolutely do not make sense.

If God created us in his perfect image, and loves us dearly, then why is life so sad, so hard, full of senseless suffering?

Of course that question is as old as humanity.

There is a branch of theological studies called Theodicy, which is an examination of the role of God in human suffering.

For centuries theologians, philosophers, and ordinary people of every persuasion have examined the question of the role of God in human suffering.

Now, a surprising number of people believe that God intentionally causes human suffering in order to grab our attention and teach us lessons.

They believe that if God gives us blessings, doesn’t it makes sense that God also causes suffering?

If we say we are blessed when things go well, then shouldn’t we assume we are cursed when things do not go well?

In casualty and property insurance policies there is a category for “Acts of God.” Acts of God are things like tornados, earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, tsunamis.

Calling these occurrences Acts of God made perfect sense for ancient peoples who had no way to make sense of nature, no scientific explanations.

They believed the gods were angry when disasters happened, when there was no rain for months, or there were floods or tornadoes they were being punished.

Today, with the benefit of science and technology, we know better.

We understand how nature creates certain conditions which result in catastrophic events.

We know what causes volcanoes to erupt, avalanches to be set off, rivers to flood, for this is the way the world works.

We understand the conditions in nature which create such things.

By the same token, we now know what causes disease and cancer, not only heredity and certain things we put into our bodies, but also various

environmental chemicals, pollutants, pesticides and other properties.

We know that a strand of DNA becomes mutated, when cells reproduce and sometimes that forms a tumor.

Is that an act of God? No, it is the result of certain actions in our bodies.

We know what causes accidents. Sometimes people drive drunk, do stupid things, take risks. If people behave irresponsibly and accidents occur, is it God's fault?

There are hazards inherent in this world and many forces beyond our control.

And yet so often when these things happen, we ask:

Why God, Why?

I heard about a preacher who believed that Hurricane Katrina, which hit the Gulf Coast in August of 2005, was caused by God to teach those people a lesson.

He also believes that AIDS was sent by God for the same reason, to teach certain people a lesson.

I would have nothing whatsoever to do with such a God, would you?

This particular preacher happens to be a cancer survivor, and he said cancer was just God's way of getting his attention.

Now I have no doubt that cancer gets your attention, and I have heard people say that cancer gave them an unexpected gift, the gift of living intentionally, purposefully, thoughtfully.

But to think that God would deliberately cause something like that in order to get someone's attention, or teach them a lesson?

If you wanted your son or daughter to learn patience and compassion, would you inject cancer cells into their body to teach them these things? Would you intentionally inflict something life threatening upon those you love to get their attention?

You would never do such a thing. It would be vicious and cruel.

And yet many people assume this is exactly the way God works in human life.

So many of the stories in the Bible demonstrate God's passionate and single minded desire for human growth and good.

Such a God would never intentionally cause human suffering.

Yet God does not save people from themselves.

A great deal of human suffering comes as the result of bad choices, and pride, ego, selfishness.

There are natural forces in the universe, and free will within human beings,

which do result in tragic circumstances.

God has given us freedom, and sometimes it comes at a terrible price.

But God is not behind every disease, every disaster, every accident.

God is not orchestrating every awful thing that happens
in order to get someone's attention or teach them a lesson.

Instead of viewing all human suffering as caused by God,
we need to consider God as the antidote to suffering.

God does not cause it, but God is the one who gives us the grace to bear it
and the courage to get through it.

Every painful experience, every loss, every setback presents us with new
opportunities for goodness and growth, if we are open to them.

I have been thinking about these things for 35 years now.

I began asking questions about the purpose of human suffering

when I was 15 years old. During my 15th year,

just one month before my 16th birthday, my father took his own life.

On a rainy Sunday evening, he shot himself in the heart and died instantly.

I was the last person he spoke with before he died.

It was horrible, but some of the things that were said to our
family at the time were also horrible.

People said, "He is so much better off now." "God needed him in Heaven."

"The souls of suicides will always be in limbo,
because suicide is the sin of Judas."

You can imagine how hurtful that was, and perhaps people have said equally
hurtful things to you when your heart was broken.

Such statements only cause more pain, more isolation, more loneliness.

That experience propelled me on a very personal spiritual quest to try to understand
the role of God in human suffering.

There is still so much that I do not know.

But this is what I do know: My father took his own life because he was
sick at heart. He had health problems, job problems, marital problems,
and life was just too painful and he could not see a way out.

It was an unnecessary, senseless act that had nothing to do with God.

It was the farthest thing from God's will, in fact I'm sure it broke God's heart.

Of all the things that are said at the time of a tragedy, I think the worst thing of all is
to suggest that it was the will of God.

God never wills for anything terrible or tragic to happen to those he loves.
I think that in all tragic situations, God's heart is always the first heart to break.

At Columbine, on September 11, 2001, in Iraq and Afghanistan today,
in that place where someone is being tortured or beaten to death right now,
God's heart is breaking.

There are over 6 billion people alive today and
100 of them die every single minute.
150,000 people will die today and God loves every single one of them.
They are all precious to God.

Nobody suffers or dies outside of the tender care of our God.

So God doesn't cause suffering, but is actually the antidote to suffering.
And sometimes, not always, but sometimes good things result from tragic situations.

My father's suicide brought our family closer together.

It made us more sensitive and compassionate.

I am convinced that I would not be a minister today without that experience.

It set me on a path of searching and wanting to help others in their suffering,
and that is the heart of my call to ministry—to help hurting people.

Do I think for one second that God planned my father's suicide in order to make me
a minister? Of course not. But something good came out of it.

Now it is one thing to say in retrospect that you learned from suffering.

But when you are in the midst of a heartbreaking experience, it is so very hard to
believe you will ever feel good again, or that positive things could ever result.

That is where faith and trust come in.

You are giving yourself a great gift by coming to church each week.

Because the spiritual wisdom you attain now, will be of great help to you later.

Turning to God when things go well will prevent you from turning away from God
when things go badly.

When suffering comes, you will have deep inner resources,
and God will give you more strength that you never even dreamed you possessed.

Your faithfulness to God now will allow you to endure and even transform
some of the most seemingly hopeless situations of your life.

I have known a few people in my life who were genuinely pure in heart.

People who were loving, kind, forgiving, always looking for the best in others.

When I got to know them a little better I learned that in every case
they had suffered a great deal.

They had been through deep, dark valleys of despair.
 But their suffering made them gentle and kind, not bitter.
 That is the sort of person I hope to be.

The story of Job in the Old Testament circulated orally in the second century before Christ and was most likely written down in Hebrew at the time of David and Solomon. It is an ancient story examining the importance of faith in the face of suffering. Job is a good man, a man of piety, virtue and faith. He lives a righteous life, and yet he experiences terrible suffering, tragedy after tragedy. Job loses all of his wealth, his livestock, his house, his servants, and his family. He develops boils all over his body and endures all of these calamities without blaming God. Three friends visit Job and try to explain why all of this is happening to him, but they are not much help, to say the least. They cite Job's sinfulness, lack of faith, they make matters worse. Finally, God tells Job that God's ways are beyond human comprehension. God answers simply, "I am the Lord. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? What do you know about the universe?" It may not be a very satisfying answer to the question of suffering, but it's true. God's ways are not our ways, and there is so much we will never understand. Besides, our view of suffering is often rooted in our own sin and selfishness. I know that when someone I love dies, much of my grief is around the death of my expectations, my needs, my hopes. Much of my grief is for me. Sometimes our suffering is compounded by our own self centeredness. The story of Job teaches us that human life on earth will always be sad and tragic. But it is not always about us. God is still God, and God is still good.

I want to have a long, happy, healthy life, and I want that for all of you, as well. I would not wish suffering upon anyone on this earth. But I know that is not the way life works out for any of us. We will have our hearts broken again and again and again. We will lose people we love, lose our health and abilities, and lose our very lives. Yet, in our suffering we can learn, grow and even glorify God.

We can become more compassionate, sensitive, and faithful,
and more deeply committed to reduce the suffering of others.
Because everyone we meet is fighting a hard battle in this life.

When bad things happen in my life, I want to embrace
the lessons suffering has to teach.
I want to become a better person, not in spite of my sufferings,
but perhaps even because of them.

Why do terrible things happen to us in this life?
We will never know this side of Heaven.
That is just the way the world works, the way human life is designed.
But in the meantime, when such things happen we have a choice.
We can live in bitterness and despair, feeling resentful and self absorbed,
or we can keep open and trusting hearts,
growing in faith, hope and love, no matter what happens to us.
And we can trust and believe that God will see us through.
Amen.

When I am hurting I often turn to Scripture. Some verses which have been a great
help and comfort to me during times of suffering in my own life:.

The 23rd Psalm, which we will read together in unison.

Romans 8:31-39: “What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against
us? If God did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also
give us all things with him?”

What can separate us from the love of Christ?

Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness
or peril or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors
through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life,
nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will
be able to separate us from the love of God we find in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Revelation 21:1-4:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth

had passed away, and the sea was no more.

I saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven and I heard a loud voice saying, "Behold the dwelling place of God is with human beings."

God will dwell with them, and they shall be God's people, and God will be with them. God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning or crying or pain any more. For the former things have passed away."

Finally,

I have a picture hanging in my office that I look at every single day. It is from a card that a friend sent to me after my mother's death, and it says:

"Just when it feels like you will never smile again.....

Life Comes Back."

Let us pray...

Dear God:

Sometimes the sadness of this world overwhelms us and we feel utter despair.

There is so much that we do not understand.

But our ways are not your ways, and while we walk this earth,
help to embrace our sorrows with grace and courage.

Help us to believe that you are with us, giving us strength and hope
and that one day you will wipe every tear from our eyes
and we will arrive in a place where joy never ends.

Amen.