

## IS THERE A REASON FOR EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS?

John 9: 1-11

Is there a reason for everything that happens? Yes there is. There is a reason why people get sick and die... There is also a reason why people are happy and flourish in life... There are reasons why people suffer frustration, heartbreak and despair... There are also reasons why people succeed in life and build enriching relationships... But sometimes, people want to believe there is a reason for everything that happens because it helps them see all of life as ultimately meaningful. There's way too much we cannot see and cannot control in life. There's way too much we care about and people we care about, and that makes us feel vulnerable. Any number of things can go wrong and sometimes all at once. To believe and to assert that everything happens for a reason even if we cannot see it, and a reason that is ultimately directed toward a good purpose, helps us cope with all that is heart-breakingly tragic and cruel in our lives and in our world.

But wishing it were so doesn't make it so. And sometimes, even though the intention is a caring one, it can end up causing more hurt and harm than comfort. What do I mean?

Let's begin with our scripture reading. The story our reading tells goes a whole chapter. We've only read the first 11 verses. It's all about blindness and sight. A man born blind becomes able to see because he believes in Jesus' power to heal his blindness and help him see. In contrast, the religious authorities of the people who are supposed to be spiritual seers and guides end up condemned as truly blind. Even as they can see physically, they are blind spiritually. Blindness is not just a physical condition, but a spiritual and psychological one too.

OK, so what is it that Jesus wants his disciples to see? Well, first off, the disciples ask a question of Jesus that reveals something of their worldview, a worldview shared by most. "Teacher, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Everything happens for a reason, right Jesus? Everyone knows that. So, given that you're a prophet and can see all things, tell us, is the reason the man is suffering the tragic condition of blindness because he has committed a serious sin? Or is it his parent's fault? I mean, someone or something has to be blamed as the reason for something so bad to happen to him, right? And even though terrible things happen in our world, good things happen too. There is a moral structure to the universe. Even though sometimes bad things happen to people who don't deserve it and good things happen to people who also don't deserve it, eventually justice catch up, no? You reap what you sow in the end, no? It's the law of Karma, no?

And more than this, if something bad happens to someone who is innocent, it should be comforting for them to believe that God is ultimately in control and is working out some

greater good purpose through it all, no? Maybe the person may have a hard time accepting the bad that's happened, but if they believe there is ultimately a larger good reason that will make sense some day, it can help them cope with what appears so senseless right now, no?

But is this so? Or is this just some way to pretty up reality? I mean, what if there is no larger good reason for why bad things happen? What if God does not control the strings like some puppet master? And what if there is more randomness and chance in the universe than we have the courage to accept?

OK, so how does Jesus answer such questioning? Is it the man or his parents who are to blame for his blindness? Neither one, says Jesus. Neither the man nor his parents are any worse sinners than anyone else. OK, Jesus, then what's the reason he's hit so hard? Doesn't that make our world more scary and less ordered than we would like?

Well, Here's the answer Jesus gives in response: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned. He was born blind so that God's work's might be revealed in him." And what are these works? "We must work the works of the One who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work." Jesus is speaking metaphorically here. What he's saying is that his works of healing and transforming love are God's works. Offering such healing love while it is day means we do it while the door is open and the opportunity and need present themselves. Jesus doesn't have an answer for why things happen the way they do. They just do. Don't look for a reason in the person or their family. And don't look for some larger reason in God either as the cause. It is just cruel to think and talk this way when it's something really bad or sad that's happened.

But where God's presence and energy flow can move with purpose is by engaging tragedy and injustice with healing compassion and compassionate presence in the suffering. The man's blindness is an opportunity for any of us to do something, to care, to heal, to be present, to support and in this and other ways we bear witness that God is alive. God' energy as Christ's healing energy, and the wind and flame of the Spirit are flowing through us to save and make whole in the face of all the brokenness in and around us... Do you need any more reason and purpose than that?

And to help us understand all this a little more, let me tell a story. One of the greatest classics of western literature is a novel by the great writer: Fyodor Dostoevsky. The book is entitled: *The Brothers Karamazov*. It is Dostoevsky's last and greatest novel, written in 1880. One of the big questions the book addresses is the question that is the title of this sermon: "Is there a reason for everything that happens?" Dostoevsky himself experienced some terrible things in his life. As a journalist and a protester with the people against a corrupt imperial regime, he was arrested and imprisoned in Siberia for 10 years. It was brutal. Unlike many fellow prisoners who didn't survive, Dostoevsky made it, but not without some deep scars and trauma. One of

the key things that helped him survive was the discovery of faith and an experience of Christ deeply personal and empowering. He came out broken, yet alive. He rediscovered writing and writing was a big part of his healing journey. His personal suffering and witnessing to the evil in the world also made him that much more sensitive and compassionate toward suffering everywhere in the world. Add to this the tragic death of his child Alyosha, who died suddenly after an epileptic seizure... Out of this immense pain and loss and the struggle to believe, to understand and to hope, *The Brothers Karamazov* was born.

The book's main characters are a father and his three sons. Their relationship is terribly conflicted and dysfunctional. The eldest – Dimitri – is caught up with making money, securing a good marriage and getting status in the world. Doesn't everyone want money, fame and fortune? He needs his father's help to do this. But his father not only tortures him psychologically, but competes with him in every way. Out of his multiple affairs, corrupt business dealings and narcissistic, self-serving heart, bad things can only come. And yet, a child always seeks their parent's approval. Things keep escalating though, until the father ends up dead and murdered. Whose to blame? The eldest son, Dimitri, is the obvious suspect. He is most like his father – ruthless, cunning and self-serving. And... he has motive.

But then there's the middle son Ivan. Ivan is a frustrated, disillusioned and cynical middle child whose heart has been broken so many times, he has lost faith in the goodness of humanity and the goodness of God. In one of the most famous passages in the novel, he confronts his younger brother Alyosha who is preparing to devote his whole life to God as a monk. Ivan challenges Alyosha to explain how it is that there can be a good enough reason for everything that happens in the universe when such happenings include the suffering of the innocent? How can you believe in a God who holds all things together and directs the course of events towards a larger goodness when this includes the suffering and even torture of children?

Ivan goes on to itemize story after story drawn from the daily news papers in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia, true life stories collected from the time. These stories document cruel abuse of children by parents or elders, abuse that when not leading to death would have left a lifetime of trauma and scars in innocent lives. The finale of Ivan's heart-breaking tirade is to declare to his brother that if the price of getting to heaven is to believe in God against such terrible happenings, and to believe that everything happens for some good reason because God is God, then Ivan returns his ticket to heaven. He'd rather not get to heaven if the price is accepting that even the innocent suffering of children is a necessary means to a greater good.

OK, so how does young Alyosha respond to his older brother Ivan? Can he justify in any way how any good reason can make up for the cruel suffering of the most innocent? No, he cannot. How he does respond is with his heart and his actions. Alyosha is a Christ-figure and he also represents the innocent life of Dostoevsky's own child also named Alyosha, tragically cut short. How can the universe make any sense? It only makes sense when love is activated and

compassion is lived. As much as his father was a monstrous narcissist, Alyosha's heart is big enough and free enough to grieve his death... As much as his elder brother is a frustrated social climber, Alyosha is the one ministering to him and visiting him in custody, and whether he is a murderer or not, he will be there for him... As much as Ivan is so engrossed in his own misery and slams everything Alyosha holds sacred, he ministers to his middle brother as Ivan's despair leads to a mental health breakdown... and in the last part of the book, Alyosha intervenes to support a broken family with a dying child and the child's school friends. The school friends are also guilt-ridden for having made fun of the child in school earlier on for being so sickly, while having now to deal with his tragic death. Alyosha reaches out to the family grieving the death of their own child and the school friends seeking redemption and forgiveness. The redemption of life in a world of cruel suffering, especially the suffering of vulnerable children, is met by a spacious compassion that embraces all the pain in a beautiful connection of tender, healing love.

And this is the path to Dostoevsky's healing too, a path to finding faith again in the face of his own devastating and senseless loss... And it is also very much the response of Jesus to his disciples in our gospel reading. Even as there is a reason for everything that happens, there is no good enough reason for the terrible things that happen. Don't blame someone for their suffering and don't justify it by throwing out some future hope that it will serve some larger redeeming good in time. The loss, the pain and the suffering cannot be justified... An infinite God of infinite love is infinitely broken by such suffering and death... Hearts don't mend like a piece of torn cloth and we can't just fix a broken heart...

But the power of love as it flows through us and generates compassionate and healing presence with others is also infinite in what it can do. Jesus is telling his disciples that every bit of suffering in the world, no matter what reason has caused it, is an opportunity to glorify God. Every bit of suffering is an opportunity for love to shine, and the greater the pain, the greater love must shine and the greater the glory of God may be served by such loving. Isn't the opportunity to love fiercely and deeply a reason to believe and to hope?...  
Amen.