

A Monthly Message from Pastor Mike and Mandy

Dear Parish Family,

In recent months we have appealed to you to give offerings to Japanese disaster relief and to the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesu (a Lutheran Church with which the NALC is in partnership) to help Christians victimized by their Muslim neighbors. Each is a response to great human suffering, caused in one case by a natural event, the other by human action.

Such notorious events again raise the perennial question of the mystery of human suffering. If there is an omnipotent God, why is there suffering? Some people have based their atheism on what they deem the inadequate answers to this question.

What does the Bible say about suffering? No simple answer can be given to this inquiry. But let us give the complex answer or complex partial answer.

On one level of the Holy Scriptures, indicated primarily by *Proverbs* and *Deuteronomy*, the answer is straightforward and applies to many cases of suffering. The individual or nation that is righteous is rewarded in this life, the wicked are punished. *Psalms* reflect this view. In *Proverbs* we find sayings such as this, "Be assured, an evil person will not go unpunished, but the offspring of the righteous will be delivered." (Proverbs 11: 21 ESV) Experience bears out the scriptural truth that the righteous prosper in this life and the wicked do not. But, it is not always so.

The book of *Job* illustrates an instance of the righteous man who bears much suffering for no apparent reason except that his righteousness is tested in a contest between God and Satan. *Job* represents the problem of the suffering of those who are not among the wicked. In the end, *Job*

submits to God; and, during the whole ordeal, never curses Him. The fact is that the righteous do suffer and often suffer more than the wicked. The wicked sometimes prosper.

Now it is true from a Christian perspective that no one is truly righteous. Luther drove home this point. He got into trouble for saying that even the most righteous act can include sin and that even after Baptism we sin. Because of original sin, we are congenital sinners. It is only the righteousness of God that justifies us, so that we may be saved. Paul tells us that we are all under the wrath of God without Jesus Christ. All of us suffer for the sins we commit, even those that seem to prosper.

Psalm 22 speaks of the righteous man who is scorned and despised (vs. 6). It is this very Psalm that Jesus quotes on the cross, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” (vs. 1, ESV) The perfectly righteous man, the only one in history, suffered the terrible death of crucifixion. Every one of the Gospels attest to Jesus’ perfection and innocence. Here in its ultimate form is the theme found earlier in the Scriptures and Apocrypha of the suffering of the righteous.

Jesus’ righteous suffering and death are crucial (a word that comes from the Latin for cross) to our salvation. The sacrifice of the Son of God gives us life. It is the great exchanged cited by Luther: the Savior dies so that we may have life.

We disciples follow in the *Via Crucis*, the way of the cross. Christians suffer because of their dedication to the Lord like many Christians have recently experienced in Ethiopia. Added to the everyday suffering that all people know is the added suffering that comes from being a Christian. Peter speaks of this sort of suffering in his first letter.

Luther emphasizes that suffering can be productive in slaying the old Adam/Eve, that is the old nature in us that remains after Baptism. In the struggle between the flesh and Spirit in us, the

flesh is slain by suffering. This suffering is experienced in our own station in life, which is our vocation. Our vocation includes married and family life, our work, our discipleship through the Church, our activity as citizens and as community members, etc. We do not pray for suffering, but it can be beneficial in breaking the sin in us and driving us to yearn for heaven.

Christian faith recognizes that the righteous (those made righteous by God through Christ) will be blessed and the wicked punished. All of this is worked out in the life to come. No one will escape God's judgment and justice. This is a vital aspect of Christian theodicy (justification of God's ways in the world).

Suffering due to natural events, earthquakes, tsunamis, tornados, hurricanes, floods, disease, etc., has an opaqueness that resists explanation in God's economy. Violence of human beings is made comprehensible by the theological, confessional, and scriptural tenet that we are fallen creatures.

Paradise was a perfect place without sin or natural disaster. But, we do not inhabit that place. The gates of Eden are guarded by the cherubim with flaming swords. Now we have sin and because of sin, death, as Paul states so well in *Romans*.

We will have to live with the resistance to explanation of nature's contribution to human suffering. We live in the midst of natural forces determined by what we call natural laws. God provides all that we need (see *The Small Catechism*) through nature and its workings. Thus, nature is ambivalent, giving life and death.

Only in the end will we see clearly. In the meantime, we either see the world as containing sin and evil without God or sin and evil that is being overcome by God for our benefit. Denying God does not solve the problem of theodicy. It aggravates the conundrum. Do we want to live in a

universe that contains sin and evil without the goodness of God? To accede to this thought is capitulation to the deep darkness of nihilism.

We Christians teach, believe, and confess that a good God created what is good. We have fallen as a result of our sin. Now sin and evil are in the world. In the end, a new heaven and a new earth will come to be, and we will live in beatitude, because we shall behold God face to face. All suffering will disappear. Perhaps, we shall receive answers to all our questions. Even if we don't, we shall be bles

In Christ,

Pastor Michael Tavella

Pastor Amanda Grimmer