

**Bad Things Happen to Everyone**  
John 9:1041                      March 2, 2008

I can't tell you how many times over the years people have sent me a copy of "Great Truths About Life That Little Children Have Learned." It's such an intriguing list. I'm sure many of you have already heard them, but...

- 1) "No matter how hard you try you cannot baptize a cat."
- 2) "When your mom is mad at your dad, don't let her brush your hair."
- 3) "Never ask your 3-year-old brother to hold a tomato...or an egg."
- 4) "You can't trust dogs to watch your food for you."
- 5) "Don't sneeze when somebody is cutting your hair."
- 6) "School lunches stick to the wall."
- 7) "You can't hide a piece of broccoli in a glass of milk."
- 8) "Never wear polka-dot underwear under white shorts....no matter how cute the underwear is."<sup>1</sup>

Can you imagine the experiences these children had to have had in order to come to these "great truths?" Can't you just imagine some children attempting to baptize a cat? I think I remember learning the broccoli lesson myself – only it was a piece of tough steak. The point of my using this illustration today is that many new insights, new perceptions come to us as a result of such dramatic eye-popping experiences.

The disciples observed a man born blind and it dawned on them that this would be a good case study for them to learn from the master his perspective about such things – you know, what he believed about the relationship between sin and suffering. Personally, I find their question repulsive. Here's a guy suffering and they want to connect it to someone's sin – to something God intentionally did to the poor guy in order to punish someone for something. Whew! It causes me to wonder about the kind of God some people believe in.

Kathryn Lindskoog had MS, multiple sclerosis – a chronic disease that gradually weakens and paralyzes the body. I can't believe some of the things she reports people having said to her in her life. "You must really like to be sick; you bring so much of it on yourself." That comment was made by a relative who never even sent her a get-well card.

Another relative once told her that "the reason I have perfect health is that I think right; nobody gets sick unless he thinks wrong."

And then there were these: "I know just how you feel about being crippled; I had a bad case of tennis elbow last month." "Your present improvement is just wishful thinking." "I know you fake your limp to try to get attention." That one was from her pastor and he was serious. And then, perhaps the cruelest one of all: "God must cherish you to trust you with this burden."<sup>2</sup>

Isn't it amazing the kind of God some people believe in?

A country preacher visited his parishioners after a flood. One of his parishioners was a farmer who lost his crops and cows. The preacher tried to offer comfort by quoting: "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth." The farmer just looked at him and drily replied, "Well, I believe he overdid it this time."

And then there were those comments made by TV evangelists Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell after the bombing of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. You remember, when they commented that it was God's unhappiness with gays, feminists and People for the American Way? What kind of God is it that some people have?<sup>3</sup>

"Who sinned?" the disciples asked Jesus. What? How could they ask such a question? Do you suppose they believed that God looks down from heaven and says to a sinning father, "All right fellow. I know that you've been cheating on your taxes and your wife and so I am going to make that baby you are expecting be blind to punish you. Zap! That will show you!" What? What kind of God do some people have? What kind of God was it these disciples, our forefathers in the faith, had?

I don't know about you but I can't help but wonder also about how the blind man and his parents felt about being the object of such a theological discussion. I mean, here was a man born blind and the reaction of the disciples was to have a theoretical discussion with Jesus about the man's suffering.

Have you ever had it happen to you? You have a health problem and share it with some folks and they proceed to give you their perspective on why your sick.

One preacher told of just such an experience in his life with these words: "I put myself in the place of this man (the blind man) the other day. I had awoken earlier with a wretched sore throat. At a meeting that morning I said to some participants, 'I've got a horrible sore throat. I can hardly talk. Don't know how much good I'll be able to contribute to this meeting.'

"With that the two people to whom I said this launched into an energetic conversation on the origins of sore throats: 'I heard that if you don't intake enough vitamin C you are a candidate for lots of sore throats.' The other said, 'People just don't take good care of themselves anymore. At this time of year people ought to know that with the constant changes of weather a sore throat is always a possibility.'

"On and on they went – I turned away in disgust. What I wanted was a modicum of sympathy, not a debate on how I had failed to take good care of myself and how I had no one to blame but myself for my sore throat! If I felt that way about a theoretical debate over my sore throat, think of how this poor man born blind felt about the disciples' theological discussion! You're blind? Well now, let's get out our Bibles and see if we can find good material on the issue of the moral origins of blindness."<sup>4</sup>

One of my pet peeves is those phone calls we pastors get from the media after a disaster, "Tell me pastor, what do you have to say about this terrible thing has happened?" You have to understand, they don't call wondering about our opinions about the thousands of children who die every day because of hunger or the thousands who are being killed in wars. They want to know why God kills people with hurricanes or floods or earthquakes. They want us to defend God or explain God or ... I don't know, you tell me what they want.

Bishop Willimon tells of the phone calls he received after the Tsunami hit the day after Christmas in 2006. "At first I wanted to reply, 'How do I explain it? Well, I'm not an oceanographer myself but I think that the earth's crust cools, the plates shift, earthquake happens, and then the tremors set off huge waves out at sea. At least that's what I picked up on the Learning Channel.'" But, he resisted because he knew what they meant by their question was really, "You say that you believe in a good God, so how could a good God allow something like this to happen?"<sup>5</sup>

Brothers and sisters in Christ, there are no easy answers here. Bad things happen to everyone - all of us. I have to admit to you that I mistrust almost all answers offered about why bad things happen to both good and bad people. I don't think there are any good answers to the question.

In the British movie "Whistle in the Wind," a pet kitten dies after the children had prayed that it would get well. They went to see their pastor. They found him in a teashop, taking a morning break. He was obviously enjoying his tea and reading a newspaper. They asked him, "Why did God let our cat die?"

The pastor was a little annoyed at being disturbed during his tea about a dead cat, but he dutifully launched into this long, complex, theological response. The children stood there patiently and listened. He wished them well when he finished and went back to reading his newspaper.

As they walked away the little boy held his older sister's hand. He looked up at her and said, "He doesn't know, does he?"<sup>6</sup>

Many attempts have been made to answer the question about God's role when it comes to human suffering. Some of them are helpful. One preacher summarized the most common and beneficial ones this way: "If God won't promise us safety, what does (God) promise? (God) promises that (God) will not allow more to be put on us than we, with (God's) help, can bear. (God) promises that (God's) grace will be sufficient for our needs. (God) promises that nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from (God's) love. And, no matter how bad something may be, (God) promises that if we share it with (God) in faith, (God) will make it produce some good. Those are God's promises."

For me, it's not about providing an answer to the question about why, but understanding what's going on with God when we suffer. For me, the most comforting thought is that God cries with me – that God hurts with me – that God is compassionate – that God resurrects out of the bad – that God heals – that God walks alongside.

One of the most helpful ways I ever heard it put was reported in a newspaper interview with Father Ron Wilker, then priest of Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Coldwater, Ohio after the tragic deaths of several members of one family in his parish. He said: "The first tears shed were the tears of God. This was not God's plan. This was another example of how fragile our lives are."<sup>7</sup>

Professor Lew Smedes says in his book, How Can It Be All Right When Everything is All Wrong, "God's own answer to suffering is to join it, feel it, hurt with it. A sufferer screams to God in the all-wrongness of his life, 'Why have you abandoned me?' God answers by joining him in life's most horrible wrongness. Jesus hangs on a cross and somehow, God hangs with him. God joins us and gets himself hung for his trouble."<sup>8</sup>

The real miracle here is that Jesus stood with the blind man in the midst of his suffering and had compassion and tried to do something about his suffering, thus revealing the true nature of God, compassion. Jesus cared for the man in need more than he cared to enter into a theological debate with his followers about the man's suffering.

Behind everything that happens to us, there is a loving God who will never leave us or forsake us. Suffering is not necessarily the result of human sin. Bad happens to everyone – both the good and the bad. Our statement of faith is "God is with us."

“On the night before he was betrayed Jesus took bread and he broke it and he shared it with his disciples and he said,…”

1. James W. Moore, “Encounters With Christ I: Jesus & the Man Born Blind,” Encounters with Christ, 2001, 0-0000-0000-15.
2. Kathryn Lindskoog, “What Do You Say to Job?” Leadership (Spring, 1985), pp. 93-94. Quoted in Ron Lee Davis, Healing Life’s Hurts (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1986) and further quoted in King Duncan’s sermon: “What Kind of God Is That?” Collected Sermons (Dynamic Preaching, 2005), 0-000-0000-20.
3. King Duncan, “What Kind of God Is That?” Collected Sermons (Dynamic Preaching, 2005), 0-000-0000-20.
4. William H. Willimon, “The Glory of God,” Pulpit Resource, January – March, 2008, p. 38.
5. Ibid.
6. Dr. Bill Bouknight, “Why Did God Allow That to Happen?” Christ United Methodist Church, for [www.eSermons.com](http://www.eSermons.com), Memphis, TN, 0-000-000-01.
7. The Lima News.
8. Lewis Smedes, How Can Everything Be All Right When Everything is All Wrong? (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 68.