

Sermon – When Life is Unfair
Sunday, November 24, 2013
Scripture Readings – Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

We celebrate St. Andrew's Sunday on the final Sunday of the liturgical calendar, also known as Christ, the King Sunday. Today we honor Christ, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end of our faith and remember the mystery of his death on the cross. Our first reading is Colossians 1:11-20. In this early Christian hymn, we gain insight into the meaning Christ had for his first generation followers. In Christ, we see the image of the invisible God, the first born of creation and the head of the church. Listen now for God's word. (Read Colossians 1:11-20.)

On this Christ the King Sunday, it is the advent of Jesus' nativity that in one week's time will be on the minds of Christians. Both days thus celebrate the multiple meanings of Christ's identity. The same Christ who is nailed as king also suffers a cruel death at the hands of the state, and the same Christ who rules over all creation also enters the world as a vulnerable baby. In our second reading found in the gospel of Luke, chapter 23:33-43, we read an account of the crucifixion and the paradox of a King, who absorbs the hostility of the world, who embraces the injustice of the cross and who saves others by not saving himself. Listen now for God's word. (Read Luke 23:33-43.)

The title of the sermon: When Life is Unfair

The text: And we indeed have been condemned justly; for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong. Luke 23:41

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, whose understanding is unsearchable, who renews the strength of those who wait and who brings life out of death, thank you for understanding our bewilderment and outrage at the injustices in the world. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

In March of my 26th year, I left the windy city of Chicago for a week's vacation in Miami, Florida. My travel companion was a woman with whom I worked at Children's Memorial and Grant Hospitals. We were serving as chaplains in a year-long Clinical Pastoral Education program following seminary. This trip wasn't just a vacation for me; it was much more than that.

I was escaping...escaping a world that was becoming intolerable and my role within that world.

Each day as I talked with suffering individuals, both children and adults, and their families who helplessly stood by, hoping, I was confronted with a world that is unfair. And as a chaplain, in as much as I represented the God of comfort and healing to some, I represented the God who inflicted this suffering and loss "unfairly" to others. My head was spinning and I felt a strong sense of relief when the plane left the ground that Sunday.

I left my Bible and my clerical collar behind. All I wanted was sun, water and relaxation. I learned quickly when asked what I did in Chicago, not to respond, "Oh, I'm a hospital

chaplain,” unless, of course, I wanted to end the conversation quickly...or desired to enter into a dialogue on the providence of God, with questions like: “How can you believe in a just God, when life is so unfair?” or “If God is good and all powerful, how can God let innocent children starve?”

I didn't desire to enter into a dialogue on the providence of God then and I don't desire to give a sermon on the providence of God today. I'm not saying that these theological doctrines are unimportant but I am saying that they are limited and professing Christians on either side of any debate. I am also saying that God is too big to be confined to doctrines and God hardly needs you or me to serve as defense lawyers. I am also saying that when people have been treated unfairly in life and ask why? they are not looking for a theological explanation.

Listen to a short summary of Job from the book Wishful Thinking by Frederick Bueckner.

Job is a good man and knows it, as does everybody else including God. Then one day his cattle are stolen, his servants killed and the wind blows down the house where his children happen to be whooping it up at the time, and not one of them lives to tell what it was they thought they had to whoop it up about. Being a good man, Job says only, “The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” Even when he comes down with a bad case of boils and his wife advises him to curse God and die, Job manages to bite his tongue and say nothing. It's his friends who finally break the camel's back. They came to offer their condolences and hang around a full week. When Job finds them still there at the start of the second week, he curses the day he was born. He never quite takes his wife's advice and curses God, but he comes very close to it. He asks some unpleasant questions:

If God is all God's cracked up to be, how come houses blow down on innocent people? Why does a good man die in his prime while old men who can't remember their names go on in nursing homes forever? Job's friends offer an assortment of theological explanations, but God doesn't offer one.

Maybe the reason God doesn't explain why terrible things happen is that God knows what Job needs isn't an explanation. Suppose God did explain. Job would have his explanations. And then what? Job would still have to face his children's empty chairs at breakfast every morning.

Harold Kushner comments on Job's question in his book When Bad Things Happen to Good People. Job's friends first mistake was to think that when Job said, 'Why is God doing this to me?' he was asking a question. In reality, Job's words are a cry of pain and a plea for understanding. Instead of a question mark, the sentence needs an exclamation point. Job did not want them to explain God to him, and Job certainly did not want them to point out where his theology was faulty. Job wanted them to tell him that he was in fact a good person, and that the things that were happening to him were terribly tragic and unfair.

Job needed compassion, the sense that others felt his pain with him, more than he needed theological explanations about God's ways. Job needed friends who would permit him to be angry, to cry and to scream more than he needed friends who would urge him to be an example of patience and piety for others. He needed people to say, 'Yes, what happened to you is terrible and makes no sense.' Not people who would say, 'Cheer up, Job, it's not all that bad.'

What Job needed is what each one of us needs when life is unfair...not trite explanations. When we begin accepting that life is unfair and that God's children need comfort more than God needs defending, we stop implying that God intends to teach us through tragic deaths or that God only gives burdens to those who are strong enough to handle them.

In our self-protection, somehow we want to believe that people really do get what they deserve...that life owes me my job and people who are unemployed could find work if they really looked. Or that only people who don't take care of themselves get sick...and only negligent parents lose their children in senseless accidents. Because...if there is logic and order, then I can make sense out of this world and my God. I can find justice.

As a young chaplain, I flew to Florida to escape an unfair world. The following Sunday, I returned to Chicago, compelled to make it to the Vesper Service at Fourth Presbyterian Church... for strength and comfort in our faith tradition as I prepared to return to the hospitals that Monday morning. It is not my intension to imply that during this week in Florida I accepted that life is unfair. Neither am I saying that I graduated from seminary without my own experience of suffering.

I can tell you that when I am hurting I don't turn to dictionaries or encyclopedias, rather I call a friend...someone who will listen to me without speaking or judging...someone who knows what hurt is and who will risk joining me in mine...someone who believes that life is unfair and who understands my bewilderment.

Today we read the account of the crucifixion on this Christ the King Sunday. God didn't give us an answer on Calvary or justice. Rather, God gave us God's self. When we talk to God about the injustice in this world—God knows of what we speak. God's son Jesus was submitted to the greatest injustice in the history of humankind.

One of the criminals who died with Jesus summed it up. *And we indeed justly, he said, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.* Luke 23:41

Why the cross? What was more unnecessary and unfair than this? Tell me. Why? Jesus cried out *My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?* No easy answers, please, nothing trite, no theological explanations. Don't tell me it was to save me from my sins...not today! Not because it isn't true but because I memorized that as a child and it sounds pat. It makes it all better too soon and we're not confronted with the cost or the pain or the self-control that gave Christ the strength to absorb the hostilities of an unjust world on that cross. And because that is not what Christ was asking when he cried out. He saved others precisely because he did not save himself. And he felt alone, estranged, abandoned, forsaken. He felt that life was terribly unfair.

And his Father, our God...refusing to enter into the power plays of this world in retaliation, competition or self-protection, stood by his son, feeling helpless and broken-hearted and that life is unfair.

When we feel these things, God doesn't give us pat answers. Rather, God gives the depth of God's self, God's love. When life is unfair, I ask God, "How much do you love me?" and I remember...Jesus said, "This much!" and stretched out his arms and died. Amen