

Sunday - July 12, 2009

Pastor - Rev. Paula P. Werner

Sermon - **The Shack, Part II – The Problem of Evil**

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be formed by your grace, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen”

Today is our second sermon dealing with issues raised in the bestselling book, The Shack, by Paul Young. Last week, we thought about the trinity --- how it was presented in The Shack and how we know it in The Bible.

Paul Young, the author, portrayed God as an African American woman saying that “We think imagery and scripture define God. It took me 50 years to wipe the face of my father off the face of God the Father. My father was a violent man. He was not an alcoholic (like the father of Mack in the story), but he was addicted to religious things, and he was violent.” Paul was sexually and physically molested as a 4 year old. He grew up in Guinea the infant child of two missionary parents. Paul was taught that spirituality was living to please God and is all about your own behavior, about keeping the rules. Paul had been trying his whole life to perform so that he would receive God’s approval. He grew up with the concept of the “Santa Claus God”; you know, that belief that just like Santa, God has a list and he’s checking it twice.”

The Shack is a site where a great evil took place in the fiction of the story --the murder of Mack’s daughter, Missy. This morning we’ll look at one of the key issues most folks find perplexing -- the Problem of Evil. With an all good and all-powerful God, why is there evil? Why doesn’t God DO something about it?

What is evil? Let’s not use the term loosely. We all have hurt sorrow, difficulties and unhappiness at some point in life --- some of us have them more than others --- and we all experience broken dreams and unmet expectations. As finite creatures, we will have pain, illness, grief, failure, incapacity, and the certainty of aging and eventual death. Our life is transient; it has a beginning and an end. And there are some forms of suffering that just happen in life. So then, what is evil? There are two aspects of it for us to first consider. One is what theologians refer to as “**natural evil**”. (*the following examples are a quote from Migliore p. 101*) This refers to injury and suffering caused by diseases, accidents, fires, earthquakes, and floods. A young mother stricken with terminal cancer, an infant born with AIDS, a child killed by a runaway car, thousands buried in a mud slide caused by a volcanic eruption, hundreds killed in a plane crash in dense fog. These are examples of natural evil. These things happen because of the limits and vulnerabilities that belong to life as created by God. We and nature are subject to what we call the natural order and laws. This refers to the laws of gravity, of weather, of tectonic plates in the earth’s crusts, of electrical charges. These natural laws and order were put in place by the creator God. In order to have confidence in our world, having these laws and order helps us to depend on our world to act as we have known and been taught it would. Do we truly want and expect God to just suspend some of these natural laws impulsively, erratically in some situations --- and yet not in others – to rescue one person and yet not another? Would we want a capricious God like that? What then could we count on?

So, we can conclude that there are events that happen which some of us regard as evil because they are hurtful or have hurt, maimed or killed those we love – these events have happened as the result of the laws of nature being followed, and God not intervening in one case or another to suspend those laws.

The second type of evil is **moral evil**– The Holocaust of European Jewry during WW II by Nazi Germany has come to serve as the prime example of moral evil. 6 million Jews were murdered in gas ovens for no other reason than their Jewish ancestry. The only motive behind this consummate act of genocide was sheer hatred. The fact that it was perpetrated by a society that represented the very pinnacle of modern Western culture only underscores its horror. Nazis could not even claim that their demonic work was helpful to the German war effort, since there is abundant evidence that the opposite was the case. Jewish men, women, and children were senselessly and brutally annihilated because of their membership in the covenant people.” (above example quoted from p. 103 Migliore).

This was moral evil. Likewise, the evil that happened in *The Shack* --- the kidnapping and murder of little Missy was moral evil.

Why did God allow this to happen? We have been taught, and Christians through the centuries have believed, that God is omnipotent – all powerful. Nothing is more powerful than God. God is also all good --- and God’s creation is good, remember in Genesis how after each thing was created, it was proclaimed “good.” If God is all good and all powerful, where did this evil come from; how can this evil happen?

There are at least 3 main views held by Christians to respond to this question:

1) One view says that God determines everything and nothing happens apart from God’s plan and control. This does not mean that God directly causes evil, but that God plans for evil and renders it certain by withdrawing his protective power that keeps evil at bay. Those who hold this view cite the story of Old Testament Job, and God withdrawing his protection of Job. According to this way of thinking, evil is part of God’s will and is necessary for some greater good, which may be beyond our comprehension. This way of thinking about evil at least helps us consider that evil and the tragedies caused are part of God’s plan and therefore not meaningless events. (quoted from fgs p. 44)

2) There is another view held by some Christians that says God is not all-powerful and therefore cannot stop all evil, so evil events are not his fault. This view comes from a system of thinking called process theology, and has come about in the 20th cen. This is not a widely held view among Christians.

3) A Third view held by many Christians says that Evil exists because God has given human beings freedom of choice – free will. Evil is not a power; the world is still God’s creation, but God also created humans with the ability to choose --- we can choose God or we can choose “other than God.” Evil comes about as a choice of something “other than God”.

The ancient thinker and early church leader Augustine, used Aristotle’s philosophical arguments to explain evil this way: it is an absence of good.

In darkness, there is an absence of light.

Where there is no light, there is darkness.

In poverty, there is an absence of wealth.

Where there is little or no wealth there is poverty.

In sickness there is an absence of health.

Where health is not present, there is sickness.

Augustine believed that evil occurs when some good should be present and yet is absent. The source of evil is human and angelic free choice, which has an impact on the natural world to make it fall short of perfection. (p. 52 TGE) This is the thinking of a church leader in the late 300s whose teachings have influenced western Christianity for 1, 700 years. Tyranny, injustice, social breakdown, war, and other evil events are not caused by God but have their origin in the persons' misuse of their freedom – free will. p. 104 Migliore. **God permits** these events to occur and **uses** them to accomplish the divine purpose. God exercises sovereignty over evil by bringing good out of what by itself is only negative and destructive.” (Quoting Augustine City of God.) This is traditional Christian theology.

Let's look at the way the book *The Shack* presents this issue of evil (p. 145 RS) After noting the worsening condition of the earth, Mack asks Jesus, “So why don't you fix it?”

“Because we gave it to you.”

“Can't you take it back?”

“Of course we could, but then the story would end before it was consummated.”

Jesus said, “Have you noticed that even though you call me Lord and King, I have never really acted in that capacity with you? I've never taken control of your choices or forced you to do anything, even when what you were about to do was destructive or hurtful to yourself and others.”

Mack responded “I would have preferred that you did take control at times. It would have saved me and people I care about a lot of pain.”

Jesus replied, “To force my will on you is exactly what love does not do. Genuine relationships are marked by submission even when your choices are not helpful or healthy.” P. 145 TS

“Submission is all about relationship of love and respect.”... we want you to join us in our circle of relationship. I don't want slaves to my will; I want brothers and sisters who will share life with me.” P. 146TS

Papa said, “There was no way to create freedom without a cost, as you know. I knew that my Creation would rebel, would choose independence and death, and I knew what it would cost me to open a path of reconciliation. Could I have prevented what happened to Missy? The answer is yes.” First by not creating at all. Or secondly, I could have chosen to actively interfere in her circumstance. I did not purpose Missy's death, but that doesn't mean I can't use it for good. At this point all I have to offer you as an answer is my love and goodness, and my relationship with you.” (p. 222 TS)

The Shack portrays God as having a plan, as a God who respects our freedom, as a God who has the power – who could and can intervene, but for reasons we are not told – God does not usually interfere, even when awful evil occurs.

But in *The Shack*, God is not an absent God. God provides heaven --- and Mack gets to see his murdered Missy romping and playing and enjoying heaven – she is at peace --- this gives Mack hope. Secondly Mack is told that God brings good out of evil. It is said this way: “Papa weaves a magnificent tapestry. Only Papa can work all this out and she does it with grace.” p. 176-177TS

Papa reminds Mack, “just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn’t mean I orchestrate the tragedies. Don’t ever assume that my using something means I cause it or that I need it to accomplish my purposes. Grace doesn’t depend on suffering to exist.” P. 185 TS

Mack asked, “Is there any way out of this?” Jesus responded, “By returning. By turning back to me. By giving up your ways of power and manipulation and just come back to me.” This is the theology of The Shack. It is easier to understand that some of the other philosophers we might choose to read. It sounds familiar, too.

It sounds much like John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin, preaching a baptism of repentance, of turning from sin and the world’s hold on us, and turning to and giving ourselves to God. These views from The Shack also remind us of Jesus’ preaching about love and exemplifying with his life his submission to God, his obedience to God’s will.

However, we humans are strong, adamant in our independence, in our free will. We assert ourselves and we focus on self-centeredness instead of God-centeredness, we choose “other than God.” And our choices can bring pain, hurt, and evil.

The Shack reminds us about the evil that happened, “This was not Papa’s doing.”

Mack protests, “But he didn’t stop it.”

“No, he didn’t. He doesn’t stop a lot of things that cause him pain. Your world is severely broken. You demanded your independence and now you are angry with the one who loved you enough to give it to you. Nothing is as it should be, as Papa desires it to be, and as it will be one day. Right now your world is lost in darkness and chaos, and horrible things happen to those that he is especially fond of.”

“Then why doesn’t he do something about it?”

“He already has...”

Readers of The Shack, just like readers of the Gospel story know that God already HAS done something about the evil of the world. I can only imagine the pain that we, God’s creation, have caused by not living and choosing God always as number one priority. I imagine that God’s pain and grief at all humankind’s evil doings was much like that of King David’s who was bereft at the death of his son Absalom, even though son Absalom was rebellious, faithless, and disobedient. Still King David loved his son, no matter the evil deeds the son had done and upon the son’s death, David in 2 Sam. 18:33 said: “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!”..... Just as King David grieved, just as you or I grieve when our children do things that are wrong and hurtful, just as nonetheless we love them and grieve when we lose them, so too does God grieve when we do awful, hurtful, evil things. And so, God provided a way out of the evil, sin and death that we bring on ourselves. God became flesh, like us --- God came in human form, to experience life as we do and to show us how to live in relationship with God. God sent Jesus to be crucified, to be the sacrifice for you and me..... the story of that sacrifice is recorded in the gospels...Through no fault or sin of his own, but through the fault and sin of humankind, Jesus was the sacrificial lamb – he was crucified on a cross. Mark 15:33-34 says “When it was

noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" THIS is what God did, through the son, Jesus -- he took on all the world's evil. What others meant for evil, God meant for good. So be it.

References and quotes from

- The Shack, Wm. Paul Young – TS
- Finding God in the Shack, Roger E. Olson-- FGS;
- The Thinker's Guide to Evil, Peter Vardy & Julie Arliss—TGE;
- Faith Seeking Understanding, Daniel Migliore.