

Do you love me?

Our theological theme comes from Jesus' question to Peter, but two months into a global pandemic, as the effects of job loss, physical distancing and self-isolation take their toll, some of us may be asking that question of God right now.

I often get asked by high school students who are wrestling with their faith 'If God is good and loves us, why does He let bad things happen to good people?' Ultimately, we don't know the answer to that. But there are several things to keep in mind when we wrestle with this question:

First and foremost, God does not rejoice in our suffering. In fact, God suffers along with us: "*In their afflictions, He too was afflicted*" (Isaiah 63:9). God also offers us strengthening grace to carry us through our times of suffering: "*Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you*" (Isaiah 41: 10) and sends us friends, helpers, guides along our way.

It is also important to note the difference between necessary and unnecessary suffering. Necessary suffering is the kind of suffering that cannot be avoided with life being what it is – a cycle of life, love, loss, and renewal. It is the kind of suffering we associate with our experiences of loss and grief and heartbreak. This suffering is the natural consequence of love, and it can be through these painful experiences that we learn some of the most important lessons about our own humanity.

Unnecessary or needless suffering can be prevented or ended. Racism, misogyny, poverty, exclusion, environmental degradation, self-loathing, human rights violations, are all things that cause suffering because of choices human beings make. As individuals, families, communities, organizations and nations, we often have the power to end or prevent suffering, but we need to deliberately make choices that may sometimes go against self-serving desires, or be less convenient for us. Our Catholic Social Teachings includes the principle of working for the Common Good, which calls us to end needless suffering so that others are able to "*reach their fulfillment more fully and easily.*" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 26: AAS 58).

In the Christian tradition it is common to hear the phrase 'There is redemption in suffering', but we need to be clear that not all suffering is necessary for redemption. Too many people have used the idea of redemptive suffering to inflict pain on others for their own benefit. We should be doing our part to alleviate pain where we can (Matt 25: 34-36), and leave God to do the redemption work where we can't. That being said, we know that suffering is a part of the human experience, and it can create an opportunity to grow in some way – in patience, compassion, understanding - and it will be transformational when we allow God to comfort and guide us through it. That is when suffering can be truly redemptive!

Finally, one of the most important things to remember is that God uses *us* to help relieve the suffering of others. I am reminded of quote I have seen multiple times on social media:

"I remember a story about a Rabbi during a natural disaster. He was asked how he could explain such a tragic act of God. The Rabbi answered that the disaster was an act of nature. The act of God occurred when people stepped up to help each other."

From the time of Cain and Abel (*Am I my brother's keeper?*) to the beach shores where Jesus sat with Peter and commanded him to feed his lambs and care for his sheep, our faith has shown us our responsibility for alleviating the suffering of others when possible, and assures us that we fulfill the command to love others when we do so. It has also assured us of God's presence and strengthening grace when the suffering is inevitable. In either case, Love is always present, and Love will see us through.

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