

Message for April 26, 2020

Romans 8:31-39

I was watching the news one evening during the past week and I must confess that by the end of it, I felt emotionally numb. The newscast led off with the tragedy in Nova Scotia last weekend and how the number of victims had climbed. There were numerous clips of devastated parents, spouses and children expressing their grief and anger which were sometimes hard to watch. The news cast also included pictures of many of the deceased with brief comments about their lives and the positive difference they had made in their communities; a police officer, a teacher, health care workers, a retired fire fighter and on it went. So many innocent people who had made such a positive difference in the world, all lost because of one person's determination to inflict as much mayhem and violence as possible.

That story was then followed by the other major story of the day; the COVID-19 crisis, and once again it was numbing. The good news, at least here in Ontario, was that the number of new cases was slowing down and that perhaps there may even be light at the end of the tunnel. The bad news however was the growing crisis in so many of our nursing homes and retirement homes; there things were going from bad to worse. As with the lead story, there were clips of devastated families expressing their grief.

Truly watching the news that evening was emotionally draining and the question might well be asked: "why is this happening?" In fact several people have asked me this question in the past few weeks. We know the answer "why". The tragedy in Nova Scotia is, as I have already said, due to the fact that one man, for reasons known only to himself, decided to inflict as much pain as possible on both neighbours and strangers. With regard to the pandemic, the answer to the question "why" is known too. Somehow a virus commonly found in such as bats managed to infect a person in China and then the virus spread from there. We know the "why" in Nova Scotia and the pandemic but when people ask this question they

are usually asking “why” on a deeper level: what is really being asked is if there a point, a purpose and a meaning to what is happening.

During the past few weeks I have been asked if I think that the pandemic has been sent by God as a punishment for the world’s sin. To me the answer is a resounding NO. As revealed by the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus, we Christians believe that God is a being of love, mercy, compassion and forgiveness. In the words of St. John: “God is love.” Would a God who truly loves us send such a scourge on the world? Do we really believe that the victims in Nova Scotia or those we have lost in the pandemic deserved their fate? Of course not! Indeed during my years in ministry I have seen too many bad things happen to good people to believe that there is any co-relation between how people live and what happens to them. Tragically, sometimes bad things do happen to good people. No, being punished for sins doesn’t explain what is going on in the world around us.

Another popular explanation for “why” claims that there is a point or purpose to it all; it’s just a case that we humans with our limited understanding can’t see it. This belief that there is a meaning to life’s tragedies was certainly held by one of my great grandfathers.

Peter Porteous was a stonemason in Scotland. He lived a very difficult life that was cut short by the stone dust he inhaled while working. To make sense of his suffering, Peter concluded that there was a point or purpose to his suffering even if he didn’t know it. In fact his belief is reflected by a poem dear to his heart, whose author is unknown, entitled, “The Weaver.” The poem has been passed down through the generations by my family; in fact one of my aunts gave me a copy of it inscribed on a plaque which now hangs in my office. Sometimes I have referred to this poem as my family’s philosophy of life:

“My life is but a weaving
Between my Lord and me,
I cannot choose the colours,
He worketh steadily.

Oftimes he weaveth sorrow,
And I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper
And I, the underside.

Not till the loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly
Shall God unroll the canvas
And explain the reason why.

The dark threads are as needful
In the Weaver's skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern He has planned.

Well, this was Peter's explanation for his own tragedy and suffering. There is an answer to the question "why" but we don't know it and can't know it during this lifetime. Is this true? Perhaps, but truthfully none of us know the answer. Indeed as I said to a person a couple of weeks ago, if I knew the answer to the question "why", then I would write a book, become rich and retire! But even if we don't know why life's tragedies happen and even if we cannot control what happens to us, we can exercise some control over how we respond. Despite the pain, grief, heartache and uncertainty in the world today we can try and bring some good out of the bad. In fact we are seeing this all around us.

There is the grieving husband of a health care worker killed in Nova Scotia who is encouraging people to donate money in his wife's memory to purchase desperately needed personal protection equipment. We see people striving to make sure that the food banks are well stocked as the demand on their services grow. This past week I read about a wonderful program in Guelph. The kitchens at the university there are capable of feeding some 5000 people. With the students now gone, the chefs at the university are now working with another community organization to feed the

hungry and vulnerable in that city. At this time 300 families are being provided for and it is anticipated that the university, in connection with two other commercial kitchens supporting the program, will eventually be providing up to 50,000 meals a week to help those who need them. And on it goes: all around us there are people striving to bring something good out of the bad that is happening. Perhaps we cannot explain or control the bad things that happen but we can control our response. And of course we should remember something else too and that quite simply is this: that God is with us in both the good times and the not so good. That is the message and promise of the 23rd Psalm that I explored in my message last week and that is also the promise of today's scripture passage as well. Quoting Phillip's paraphrase of today's scripture passage:

"I have become absolutely convinced that neither death nor life ... neither what happens today nor what may happen tomorrow, neither a power from on high nor a power from below, nor anything else in God's whole world has any power to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!"

No, we may not have all the answers but we have something, rather we have someone better and that is God himself. And it is this, the loving, comforting, guiding, reassuring, strengthening presence of God that enables us to pick up the pieces when tragedy happens. It is this, the loving strengthening presence of God that enables us to persevere and carry on. It is this, the love and the power of God that sets us free to try and bring something good out of the bad. Truly nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord and that is answer enough.