

Rethinking Clichés: Everything Happens for a Reason
Luke 10:25-37, II Corinthians 7b-10
June 14, 2009

We're on an adventure of rethinking some common phrases of folk wisdom or theology used to help us understand or cope with things that happen in life. Last week we looked at the clichés "God only takes the best" and "It must be the will of God." We often hear those phrases spoken in the face of tragic circumstances. Similar phrases are "Everything happens for a reason" and "God doesn't give you more than you can handle." This morning I invite you to look behind these sayings to what they imply about our theology.

When we say "Everything happens for a reason," it seems to imply that everything happens as God intends it. This works if everything is going our way, but if life takes a turn against us, if a prayer is not answered, if tragedy strikes, is that then the intended will of God? Does God place obstacles in our pathways or orchestrate tragedy in order to teach us a lesson? Is that truly the reason why the Air France plane disappeared or a teenager from Orinda recently died?

For ages human have been seeking to reconcile the goodness of God with the evil that happens. Let's look at two common approaches to the problem of suffering.

One approach is Deism. This view "holds that God created the universe and set in motion the laws that govern its operation, but beyond this initial work, God is not directly involved in the workings of our universe. God does not intervene in our affairs. The universe is a closed system. Suffering happens as a result of the human violation of the laws God established, and as a result of the natural processes that make our planet work—storms, earthquakes, and so forth. God neither causes suffering, nor does God intervene to stop it."ⁱ

The problem with Deism is that it undermines the entire premise of the Bible, which is that God is involved in our world. God knows us by name. God chooses Israel as God's covenant people, hears the cries of the people in Egypt, and leads them out of slavery. Moreover, in Jesus God came to dwell among us, teaching, guiding, healing, and drawing humans closer to God. The witness of the Bible is that God is involved in our lives.

A second approach to the problem of God and suffering is called Theological Determinism. According to this view, not only is God involved in our world, but God has also predetermined everything that will happen on earth. God controls all things, knows all things, and is all-powerful. God has a plan and everything that happens is according to that plan. God has written the script and we are merely actors in the drama. Since God is ultimately good, loving, and just, we can trust that everything that happens will ultimately result in good; if things do

not seem to be working out now, it is simply because we do not perceive the fullness of God's plan at the moment.

The perspective of Christian determinism suggests that God directs everything to happen – thus, the belief that “everything happens for a reason.” Not only does God know what will happen, but God causes it to happen for a specific purpose. Although God may not be the direct agent of an event, because God has planned it, God is the ultimate cause.

Consider what happens when we apply this theory to instances of rape and murder. It would follow that such atrocities are predetermined by God. Does that sound like the plan or purpose of a loving and just God? Can there be a greater good that can ever justify acts of rape, torture, or murder? If God is just, good and loving, then the means God uses to accomplish God's purposes are also just and good and loving. I don't believe everything happens for a reason if, by this, someone means that the difficult, painful, even evil events of life happen according to the will and plan of God. God doesn't give us the tragedies or weighty burdens of life. In fact, most, if not all, evil in the world is antithetical to the good and loving nature of God. God does not plan for evil to be done to God's children.

When we say “everything happens for a reason,” and mean that the world is based upon cause and effect, I can understand this. The cause behind a friend's cancer is a problematic piece of DNA that led to the reproduction of millions of cells that continued to multiply, wreaking havoc on his body. The cause of rape and murder are people whose lives are very broken and who act out their hurt on others. My brother is developmentally disabled because there wasn't sufficient oxygen at his birth and he was permanently brain damaged. There are often “reasons” to explain what happens, but the cause of suffering and tragedy is not the God of justice, love, and goodness.

Beyond deism and determinism, there is a third way to look at the suffering that happens in life. God created the world along with laws that govern it. God created us with a capacity to reason, to make choices, including the choice to risk and sacrifice ourselves to save others. God allows us to live and to do things that are at times dangerous, like drive cars or parachute from airplanes. However, God does not promise to protect us from ever being hurt. Things go wrong. We make bad choices. Others make bad choices. Life happens. Although God does not prevent suffering, God promises to be present with us in the midst of it and to use it for good. God works with us to redeem our suffering. God often uses other people as channels of hope and encouragement for those in the midst of pain. Healing professionals are partners in the healing ministry of Jesus. Life happens, but God works with us to bring blessings out of misery.

On NPR I recently heard two Stanford professors speak about a course that they teach to freshmen called, “The Art of Living.”ⁱⁱⁱ The purpose of the class is to

prompt students to think about how to live with meaning and to deal with life's adversities. They encourage students to become poets of their lives, using past losses as material to bring about positive change in their lives.

In reflecting on the cliché, "everything happens for a reason," they referred to the philosopher Nietzsche, who acknowledged that while it this is a powerful way to think about the setbacks in life, it is an illusion to think that the reasons are already built in to the experience. The reasons are something we have to make for ourselves.

The professors used the example of Al Gore, who spent his entire life preparing to be President of the United States. That was taken away from him in a catastrophic defeat that marked the end of his political career. Such a loss could have had a devastating impact on the rest of his life. However, Gore chose to change the significance of that loss by reinventing himself and continuing to make a genuine public contribution in a different way. His defeat as a presidential candidate became a turning point event that allowed him to find a new way forward consistent with his own unique talents and passion.

This is an example of how God works with us to recreate our lives in response to adversity. We can integrate those experiences for our growth and development. Although neither God nor we wanted those things to happen to us, God can work in the midst of those circumstances to bring something positive to birth. This is what Paul means when he says in Romans, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God." It is what he means when, even in the face of many hardships, he heard God's promise, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." When we feel weak and powerless, God enters in to strengthen, sustain, and guide us into new life.

My personal experience and my faith in God have me responding to life's challenges with something other than, "Everything happens for a reason." I prefer to say, "Life happens, but God is working with us to bring new life out of old." May that be your experience as well.

ⁱ Adam Hamilton, *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White: Thoughts on Religion, Morality, and Politics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), p. 122.

ⁱⁱ KQED, "The Forum with Michael Krasney," broadcast May 4, 2009, www.kqed.org.