

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Feb. 3-4, 2018  
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA  
Fr. Michael Renninger

“Why is my child suffering?” It was a cry from deep within the heart of a parent.

Years ago, I was called to a hospital near Newport News. A parish family needed a priest. That’s all I knew. But when I arrived, the horrible reality became clear. A young boy had been riding his bike. An elderly driver did not see him. A horrible accident...

And now the boy, clinging to life, was about to undergo major brain surgery.

The boy’s parents kept asking, “Why is my child suffering?”

I knew that there was no good answer to that question – but *not everyone* else knew that. Just after we anointed the boy, a neighbor arrived. I am sure he was well-intentioned. But then he told the mother of the little boy that this bike accident was ‘part of God’s plan,’ and that the boy’s suffering would ‘become a gift,’ and even if he died it was a blessing because God was ‘trying to teach us something.’

The mother of the little boy looked at the man who had just said those things, and she.... slapped him in the face!

We have all experienced suffering. And we’ve probably had a well-intentioned friend try to make us ‘feel better’ through comments that are really hurtful.

Suffering often leaves us thoroughly confused, because it just doesn’t make sense. Our brains rage against the fact that, sometimes, there is just not a good answer to our heartfelt question: ‘why is my child suffering? Why is my parent suffering? Why is my spouse suffering? Why is there suffering?’

In today’s first reading, we meet a man who is crying out to God with that same question. If anyone in the Bible has a *right* to scream that question at God, it is the man we meet in this reading... Job.

According to the Old Testament, Job was a wonderful person. He followed the rules of his Jewish faith. He was a hard worker. He loved his wife. He loved his kids. He was kind to those in need. He wanted to live a life that would please God, and to teach his kids how to be faithful to the Lord.

Then, suddenly, he gets hit with tragedy after tragedy. Suffering overwhelms him. In a matter of days, he loses his wealth and worldly possessions. Not, he did not invest in Bitcoin! He loses everything through no fault of his own.

Then, his beloved children die... one by one.

Then he develops a disfiguring skin disease, and has to hide. His wife mocks him.

He prays – and the God he had served his whole life is..... silent.

Then his “friends” show up... and they are not helpful. They *think* they have an explanation about why Job is experiencing all of these horrible things.

They start with this helpful “explanation:” Jewish people at that time believed that, if you were suffering, it was proof that you had sinned and that God was punishing you. (Some of us still believe this. Have you ever heard a suffering person ask, “What have I done to deserve this?”) Job’s friends were basically telling him, “you deserve it! You must have sinned! And God, in his justice, in punishing you!”

I wonder if Job wanted to slap them in the face?

One friend of Job tries another approach. There are passages in the Bible which tell us that God can teach us important lessons when we experience adversity. But Job cannot believe that a God who lovingly created every person would purposefully inflict suffering on us just to teach us something. That would be a harsh and horrible God. So Job tells that friend to be quiet.

Job’s friends basically conclude the conversation by mocking the suffering of their friend. Job wrestles with God, and he laments the fact that his life makes no sense. He **WANTS** to understand why all of this is happening. Perhaps, like many of us, he believes that the suffering will somehow get better if he can at least understand why it’s happening.

So Job spends about 40 chapters trying to figure out suffering, trying to figure out God, and trying to figure out life. Finally, the Wisdom of God enters the scene.

First, the Lord tells Job’s friends that their explanations are worthless.

Then God invites Job to contemplate the big picture – the size of the universe, the complexity and beauty of creation, the length of time that the world has existed, the brief blip of time that constitutes our lifetimes.

And the Book of Job ends with our friend coming to two realizations. First, that the most important thing to do when we suffer is to cry out to God in prayer... to tell God everything... to talk to God about all things. Not demanding explanations, but pouring out to God whatever is in our hearts.

And then Job realizes that in his suffering, he was always in the palm of God’s hand. Job came to understand that, despite everything, God was not absent. And the only way he could go forward

was to live with the confidence which is born when we remember – *I am in God's hand.*

For 40 chapters, Job struggled because he thought that the solution to his suffering could be found in his own brain. Then he realized... ‘what I *can* do is to bring everything, even my brokenness, to God... and place myself in God's hand.’

Did you notice, in today's Gospel reading, what everyone is doing?

Just prior to today's passage, we heard the story of Jesus healing the man in the synagogue.

Then, after the synagogue service is over, Jesus walks the two blocks to Simon Peter's house. The mother in law is sick with a fever. Now, notice what they *don't* do. They don't ask, “Why is she suffering?”

What they *do* is simple – they bring it to Jesus. They tell him about her. And he acts.

Then, immediately, Mark tells us that there is a crowd outside this small house. Apparently, word has spread throughout the village: *If you're sick, if you're struggling, bring it to Jesus.*

And at the end of the Gospel passage, Jesus leaves Capernaum to go to other villages. And what happens there? Anyone who was suffering *came to Jesus.*

Oh, and there is one other little detail that Mark provides in today's Gospel. Early in the morning, after a busy day of preaching and healing, what does Jesus do? He leaves the house, finds a deserted place... and he *prays*. He brings all that he is doing, all the good work that he is undertaking, he brings it all to God in prayer.

If the Son of God needs to pray every day, why do I think I can get through the day without listening to and talking with my savior?

Back in Newport News, I am happy to report that the mother who slapped the man later apologized to him for her action. And he apologized to her for his unhelpful words.

Sadly, that mutual reconciliation happened at the little boy's funeral. But it was at the cemetery that I heard the most important thing of all. That same mother stood up at the conclusion of the burial. She thanked everyone for coming. And then she said, “I don't know why our little boy died. But what I know is this: He is in God's hand, and we are in God's hand. And, for now, that's enough.”

As you come forward for communion today, as you receive the sacrament in the palm of your hand, remember this: We are in God's hand. Where we belong. For now, that's enough. Amen.

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