

A Preacher's Problems with the Problem of Evil

W. Rush Otey, III

St. Andrews Presbyterian Church. Tucker, Georgia

Paul Tillich lamented that preachers provide answers to questions no one is asking.¹ We might also confess that often we provide scant “answers” to questions people do ask.

One of the “constants” of preaching is that in every congregation there are persons who are struggling with what is perhaps *the* decisive theological question: If God is love, why is there so much evil and suffering? (A Jew might ask, “If Jesus was the Messiah, where is the Messianic Age?”) A child dies, or is born with severe problems. A relative with Alzheimer’s disease does not die, but continues to survive. An automobile accident demolishes a couple and their children in their prime. Someone is murdered; another is executed. A medical report reads as was feared. Despite the efforts of the religious community, the number of homeless people dramatically increases. A documentary or a trip to another country reveals the ravages of famine or war.

There was once in the *Saturday Review* a cartoon that had two panels. In the first panel, the grim reaper, Death, dressed in a hood and carrying a scythe, is accosted by a little bird. The bird says, “Hello, I’m the bluebird of happiness. Why don’t you take the day off?” In the second panel, the little bird is dead. The grim reaper walks on. The existence and the perseverance of evil and suffering can be a great barrier to belief and a great theological and personal problem for the believer. From time to time one is tempted to agree with the teacher of philosophy from Prague, who said “My atheism rests upon the death of evil in the world, I cannot combine faith in God with Auschwitz. Either there is no God, or I don’t belong to God.”²

Ordinarily, preachers tend to skirt this matter in the pulpit, considering such topics as better left to the counseling session or the pastoral prayer. The one time preachers must intentionally address the subject of theodicy is Good Friday, but Good Friday crowds are not usually overflowing, and Good Friday sermons are often “brief meditations” prepared under the stress of having at least three others within the week. In any case it would be difficult to address this theme in a single presentation; yet unless a preacher somehow considers the questions people do ask, there will be a basic lack of authenticity in both the preaching and the pastoral aspects of ministry and life together. The temptation is to succumb to a quietism, a Docetism, a Gnosticism or some combination thereof.

Different Kinds of People?

Rabbi Harold Kushner has written a book entitled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.³ This is a fine intelligible treatment of a profound subject. We could all profit from studying it and discussing it, whether we agree with the rabbi's viewpoint or not.

One way of systematically exploring theodicy would be through a series of sermons on the title of this book alone. There may be, from a New Testament standpoint, some problem with the use of the term "good people." Of course, many people seem "better" than others—one would probably rather attend a party where Willie Nelson or Julius Irving, or Mayor Young, or even the President was a guest, rather than a gathering of armed robbers or child abusers or drug dealers. But the New Testament suggests that "all have sinned" (Romans 3:22-23) and Jesus warned in word and deed about looking down on one's neighbor. So, rather than two kinds of people, bad and good, there may be two more appropriate categories—the caught and the uncaught! So one might call the first sermon "When Bad Things Happen to People."

Another sermon could deal with "When Good Things Happen to Bad People." Why do the wicked prosper? It enrages us. Why does it burn us up when the wicked prosper?

Yet another exposition could be about "When Good Things Happen to Good People." Are they really more blessed by God? Or have they just found a sneaky way to beat the system, or have they simply inherited money or good genes?

A fourth topic could be "When Bad Things Happen to Bad People." We like that!! But in so doing we forget that vengeance is nowhere listed as a Christian virtue.

Different Kinds of Evil?

A second homiletical approach could be the differentiation of what we call evil or suffering. There is, of course, natural evil. Lightning struck Job's sheep. A tornado suddenly swept in and Job's ten children were but memories. People must cultivate the soil by the sweat of their brows, but need there be the gigantic famines? Men and women must labor on the earth's surface and dig beneath it, but need there be volcanic eruptions burying whole cities, and earthquakes killing thousands of terrified people in a single night? Humanity must face the harsh consequences of pollution and overindulgence, but need there also be brain tumors in little children? When such things happen we can see no immediate gain to the soul. The effect seems to be purely destructive.⁴ Tragedy can break human spirits and cause the victim, like Job, to curse the day of birth. Was the character Gloucester correct in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, "as flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport"?⁵

Rabbi Kushner put it this way:

Does God never ask more of us than we can endure? My experience, alas, has been otherwise. I have seen people crack under the strain of

unbearable tragedy. . . . I have seen some people made noble and sensitive through suffering, but I have seen many more people grow cynical and bitter. . . . If God is testing us, He must know by now that many of us fail the test. If He is only giving us burdens we can bear, I have seen Him miscalculate far too often.⁶

In addition to natural evil, about which in many cases we can do little but respond, there is human evil. Make your own catalog. The daily newspapers are full of illustrations. Our own lives are full of examples. As the comic strip, Pogo, put it some years ago, "We have met the enemy, and he is *us*!"

Perhaps the clearest illustration of corporate, social evil is the arms race. No one seems to want the arms race, yet despite recent treaties all of us contribute to it in some way or another. Billy Graham warned some time ago, "The insanity of the global arms race, if continued, will result in a conflagration so great that it will make Auschwitz look like a minor rehearsal."⁷ In just under two days, the world spends on arms the equivalent of a year's budget for the United Nations and all of its special agencies. The cost of one Trident submarine or its Soviet counterpart equals the cost of a full year's schooling for sixteen million children in developing countries. Think of what a hundred million dollars per day, if wisely spent, could do in meeting the health and social needs of the growing number of retired people in this nation!⁸

A further example of corporate or group evil is in our negligence to be caretakers of the natural order, to cultivate God's garden rather than pollute it. In Louisiana, where I resided before coming to St. Andrews, there are eleven of the twenty counties in the United States where cancer rates are the highest—eleven of twenty in one state. Is this because God is punishing Louisiana for Mardi Gras? Or is it because Louisiana people have corrupt politics? Or is it because Louisianians are frail and susceptible of illness? I think not. Louisiana is at the end of the Mississippi River, which some have described as the nation's sewer. It is also an area where refineries and chemical industries produce many noxious fumes and by-products, which in some locales have permanently fouled underground water supplies over ninety feet down. Louisiana is also a place where the economy and the politics are dependent upon and indebted to these industries. This is an extremely complex and difficult issue, as is the arms race, but somehow we must do better than the politician who took a deep breath of air when the particle count was 150 units (about twice the safe level) and said "Smells like jobs and money to me!" It also smells like death. In 1981 for example, New Orleans public water was unfit even for washing for several days when a prominent company dumped a massive amount of phenol into the river. This is unfortunately not an unusual occurrence, but in this case was significant because the culprits were apprehended. But they were fined only what to you and me would be the equivalent of a parking meter violation. How many hospital bills could be lowered or eliminated, how many funerals postponed indefinitely, if there were more prevention and more enforcement of the law?

A final instance wherein evil and suffering are not really God's doing but the result of our misusing our freedom is in the way we treat our own bodies. As Rabbi Kushner said:

The person who smokes two packs of cigarettes a day for twenty years and develops lung cancer faces problems which surely deserve our sympathy, but he has no grounds for asking 'How could God do this to me?' The person who weighs considerably more than he should and whose heart has to pump blood through miles of additional fat cells and clogged arteries will have to pay the price for that additional strain on the system, and will have no grounds to complain to God. Neither, alas, will the doctor, the clergyman, or the politician who works long hours seven day week after seven day week, even in the noblest of causes, but fails to take care of his own health in the process.⁹

Five Themes Worth Repeating

Any attempt to construct a totally rational and logical view of evil and the God of love will fail. We are dealing with issues here beyond the ken of human minds. In this question one must finally limit or redefine God's love, or God's power, or God's justice, or the reality of evil. This is summed up in the old adage, found in Archibald MacLeish's play, *J.B.* and elsewhere, "If God is good then he is not God. If God is God, then he is not good." If God is good, and we take goodness and love as the primary attributes of God, then it seems that this goodness is somehow limited or overshadowed by all the evil in the world. Goodness is not always self-evident. On the other side, if God is God, if power is taken to be the chief attribute of God, then God seems to use this power often in ways that are not good for us. God created both the chicken and the chicken hawk. Rationally, we can pay our money and take our choice. But living is another matter. We continue to live, despite our rational dilemmas with the subject. Here then, are five reminders for living which might serve as essential themes throughout one's preaching. Being candid and honest about the dilemmas is crucial.

(1) *Evil is a mystery.* We do not know how it got here or why it got here or why it remains. Neither does science know why; science simply describes what happens (or what appears to happen). Neither did the Biblical writers. In Genesis 3 we are simply introduced to the serpent, a metaphor for the mysterious evil in the world. We are not told how the serpent got there in the garden and even less why. One night in Louisiana I was enjoying the music of one of the most creative artists of our time, Count Basie, and for me this was something of a transcendent experience. But right in the middle of the concert on television, a cockroach the size of a small mouse ran out from behind the TV. We do not know why such things happen! We do not know why the ocean we swim in can also drown us in an instant, or why an accurate picture of humanity is that little figurine of an angel with a beatific smile, who holds behind his back a sling shot in his hand? Paul knew this: "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Romans 7). Evil is a mystery. Therefore we cannot accept easy answers to its challenge, easy answers which deny either our personal responsibility for much of what is evil (The devil made me do it!) or which pretend that the suffering is nonexistent (the bluebird of happiness)

or which overlook the Christ event as the sign in which evil is transformed for us and by us and in us.

(2) *Evil is relative to our own time and place and world view.* We are willing to be content with rationalizations of evil for just as long as we remain unscathed. An earthquake is an earthquake, but it is not considered evil unless it happens in populated areas. A snake is a snake is a snake; but it is not evil unless it bites someone or entices someone to bite a forbidden fruit! Cancer is a much greater problem for us when it strikes one whom we love than when it kills the person unknown to us in Love Canal, New York, or Louisiana, or Tokyo. Obituaries are often read with much less emotional involvement than is expended on the sports pages. We can rationalize evil as long as we are not personally affected by it.

More seriously, evil is relative in that we do not have a foreknowledge of the future, in that we are finite and so often are wrapped up in the crisis of the moment that we deny possible redemption. But, it *may* be possible that the last weeks of a terminal illness strengthen the bonds of a family. It may be possible that the overworked person who has a heart attack at forty will be able to sort out priorities—more time with the children, less time with the briefcase, more time and money for others, less for increasing his or her own affluence. It may be that for all the hell of marital breakdown, forgiveness and tough-minded love and friends can overcome the sense of failure and bitterness. To say that evil is relative is not to say that it is easy to face, is not to say that what we fear is not frightening, is not to say that we should not grieve deeply when we lose a dear one, is not to say everything always turns out all right in the end, is not to say that if you brush your teeth and keep your nose clean you will never have a rotten tooth or a bad cold. But to say that evil is relative is to say that in faith evil does not have to have the final word, that we are never left by God without special acts of love and mercy. It is to suggest, as many of our Seminary teachers affirmed, that we look at accidents in light of God, rather than looking at God in light of accidents.

(3) *Not everything that happens is the will of God.* This may strike some as heretical, but it may be the closest we can come to resolving the incompatibility of evil and God. There is an old distinction between what God wills and what God permits. God's will is that the world be saved, yet God permits us and the cosmos the freedom to defy this salvation and wholeness in countless ways. Not everything that happens is the will of God, because there is also freedom.

The late William Barclay, writing in his *Spiritual Autobiography*, tells of the great tragedy in his life. Barclay's twenty-one-year-old daughter and her fiance were both drowned in a boating accident. "God did not stop that accident at sea, but he did still the storm in my own heart so that somehow my wife and I came through that terrible time still on our own two feet." There came an anonymous letter. "Dear Dr. Barclay, I know now why God killed your daughter; it was to save her from corruption by your heresies." And Barclay says in his book, "I know now why God killed your daughter. That—the accidental destruction of the beautiful and the good—the will of God? If I had the writer's address, I would have written back, not in anger, the inevitable blaze

of anger was over in a flash, but in pity. And I would have said to him, as John Wesley said to someone, 'Your god is my devil.' The day my daughter was lost at sea, there was sorrow in the heart of God."¹⁰

Another of our contemporaries, Juan Arias, a Spaniard, has written a provocative essay entitled *The God I Don't Believe In*:

No, I shall never believe in the God who loves pain;
The God who blesses the new Cains of humanity;
The God who "sends" people to hell;
The God who does not know how to hope;
The God whom only the mature, the wise, or the
comfortably situated can understand;
The God who sometimes regrets having given us free will;

The God who is interested in souls and not in people;
The God who says and feels nothing about the agonizing
problem of suffering humanity;
. . . The God incapable of making everything new;
the God who has never wept, the God in whom there are
no mysteries, who is not greater than we are;
The God who is not love and who does not know how to
transform into love everything he touches.
I believe in the other God."

There is indeed a God we don't believe in.¹¹

In a recent book John Leith has reconsidered the doctrine of predestination in the Reformed tradition, and includes these helpful and provocative comments:

Predestination is a doctrine that belongs at the end, not at the beginning, of the Christian life. In writing his systematic theology, Calvin experimented with the location of the doctrine of predestination. In the final edition of the *Institutes* he located it after the doctrine of salvation and just before the doctrine of resurrection. This location seems to suggest that the doctrine stands not at the beginning of the Christian life but at the end, when Christians look back over their Christian experience and exclaim, "This is what God has done in and through my life!" This is the testimony of all the great saints. They have regarded their own lives, insofar as they were good, not as their own achievements but as the work of God's grace.

As Calvin put it, knowledge of predestination is nothing more than the testimony that we are sons of God; that is, of the grace and mercy of God. And in the presence of that grace we can but exclaim, 'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? . . . For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen' Rom. 11:33-34, 36.¹²

In the same vein, Romans 8:28 "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him." is best understood as a teleological or retrospective verse. The faith is that no evil occurrence, no suffering can obliterate or destroy the overarching purpose of God in the call issued through Jesus Christ. People may not be able to "hear" Romans 8:28 at a time of loss or even for years afterward, yet Romans 8:38-39 has been in my experience an ever-present help. It is the existential text for believers under stress.

(4) *Evil and suffering may be met and eventually overcome by suffering love, by an even greater mystery.* Evil is to be recognized. The Christian community is a body of people who can say like Job said, "I will give free reign to my griefs . . . I call for thy help . . . I stand up to plead, I rise in the assembly only to appeal for help" (Job 30:20-31). Suffering is to be shared. Evil is to be confronted. That, and not some dualistic doctrine of the supernatural, is the message of Jesus' casting out demons, and of the phrase "He descended into hell," in the Apostles' Creed. And that is our mission, to recognize one another as wounded, but in Professor Nouwen's lovely phrase, "as wounded healers," who live and die and live again in the grace of another Wounded Healer. We are called to confront suffering by taking it upon ourselves and our community of faith. Carlyle Marney used to brood, "The cross on Calvary is significant in part because already there is a cross of some kind on your hill and mine." The cross binds us to God and to one another.

One who suffers asks not for rational answers, though this may be part of any lament. Neither does the sufferer ask first for long distance condolences, for that is only the next best thing. Rather the sufferer simply longs for another's being there, what Peter DeVries called, "the throb of compassion rather than the breath of consolation: the recognition of how long, how long is the mourner's bench upon which we sit . . . all of us."¹³

One of the best things I have read on our subject lately comes not from a theology book but from a letter from a dear friend. She is one of the gentlest and most active and kindest persons one could ever hope to know. Recently she was diagnosed as having cancer, and is undergoing radiation treatment.

"I have one more week of radiation on my left cheek, and it's over, except for monthly checkups. This was a wipe out for me at first, but after tears and more tears, and tremendous energy by all sorts of people, I am out of this pit! I call it 'the beset-with-fear pit' and I believe I have been living in it for a long time.

There are fifteen patients at the hospital at the time I go daily for my treatment. No one says much, we just stare or read magazines. One day last week the therapist noticed I was turning yellow instead of red. When I came back out into the waiting room, I said, 'Hey, you all, I'm turning yellow instead of red. I guess it's because I've been afraid for so long my yellow is showing!' With that everyone woke up and one young man with a baseball cap who had never lifted his eyes, pulled his cap to show his scars and hair coming out and said, 'Maam, no one thinks I can do anything and I'm losing all my hair, but I want you to know I'm still *ME*.' So we are all bonded in our scars and scares, and maybe that's what living is

about for today.

I am reading a book entitled *Prisoners of Childhood* by Alice Miller, small but valuable. I realized why I love to visit those in prison. We are all prisoners of a sort until we get rid of old fears. As the line from "O Little Town of Bethlehem" says, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met . . ."

We all sit on the mourner's bench, full of scares and full of scars; but we are joined there also by the wounded, suffering Christ (See Phillippians 2:5-18).

(5) *The Christian hope is not for this life only, but for the life of the world to come* So many lives are too brief, unfulfilled, attenuated for whatever reason, that something, Someone deep within us cries for more if there be anything like justice. The starving infant with bloated belly and fly-laden eyes, the congenitally deformed, the terminally confused and despairing, the unused gifts in each of us make us look for life beyond the grave. In Christ that is promised us, far beyond our anticipation or comprehending. And so we must resound with symbolic and poetic language for expression of ultimate hope and triumph. In chapter twenty-one of the Revelation to John, there is the beautiful, unforgettable image of God with a handkerchief, at last wiping away every tear. To that may we add our Amen. So let it be.

NOTES

¹ See the "Introduction" to Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume 1* (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1981)

² The quotation is attributed to Milan Machovec, author of *A Marxist Looks at Jesus* (Philadelphia Fortress Press, 1976) I cannot recall the exact source

³ Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York Avon, 1983)

⁴ An excellent technical summary of various Christian traditions in dealing with theodicy is John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London Fontana, 1968) Hick contrasts Augustine and Irenaeus and attempts to construct a modern Irenaean system Somewhat in a similar path, Douglas John Hall's *God and Human Suffering* (Minneapolis Augsburg, 1986) is a valuable addition Hall also delivers constructive critiques of the ideas of Kushner, C S Lewis, George Buttrick, Diogenes Allen, and Leshe Weatherhead

⁵ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, IV, i, pp 38-39

⁶ Kushner, p 26

⁷ "A Change of Heart," interview with Billy Graham in *Sojourners Magazine*, (August, 1979)

⁸ These and similar statistics are readily obtainable from denominational Peace Fellowships A fine bibliography is available from The Disarmament Program, The Riverside Church, 490 Riverside Drive, New York NY 10027

⁹ Kushner, p 65

¹⁰ William Barclay, *A Spiritual Autobiography* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1977), p 52

¹¹ Juan Arias, *The God I Don't Believe In* (St Meinard Abbey Press, 1973), p 196 ff

¹² John Leith, *The Reformed Imperative* (Philadelphia Westminster, 1988), pp 93-94

¹³ Peter Devries, *The Blood of the Lamb* (New York Little, Brown and Company, 1961), p