

“The Impartiality of Life”

a sermon by

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Texts:

“Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil...” (Ecclesiastes 9:2).

“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

This morning I want to deal with one of the most perplexing aspects of the Christian faith: our understanding of the presence of evil in the world that God has created and called good.

One of the powerful expositions of this problem is found in the writings of Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the German concentration camps. In his book *Night*, he relates one of the most disturbing and powerful scenes in all of the holocaust literature. There is a passage in which Wiesel describes a hanging of two adults and a child. Wiesel writes:

“The SS seemed more preoccupied, more disturbed than usual. To hang a young boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips. The gallows threw its shadow over him.

The three victims mounted together onto the chairs.

The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses.

‘Long live liberty!’ cried the two adults.

But the child was silent.

‘Where is God? Where is He?’ Some one behind me asked.”

This morning I propose setting two different verses of Scripture against each other. The first is from the Book of Ecclesiastes:

“Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and to the evil” (Ecclesiastes 9:2).

The second text is from Romans, chapter eight. “We know that all things work together for good to those who love god, who are called to his purpose” (Romans 8: 28).

I.

The Book of Ecclesiastes is one of the strangest and most remarkable books in the entire Bible. The theme of the book is stated in the first chapter. “Vanity of vanity,” says the preacher, “All is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2). The Hebrew word for “vanity” is the word “hebel.” It means breath, air, and wind. That is how Ecclesiastes sees the world. It is all for nothing. “What has been is what will be,” writes Ecclesiastes. “There is nothing new under the sun.”

There is a sense in which the words of Ecclesiastes ring true. All things come alike to all. Long ago, on Calvary, stood three crosses. Two of the three crosses bore two men who were convicted thieves. The third one was a man innocent in every respect. How is it that the same fate would come to all three?

How often has our own faith met that stumbling block? One of the things that every minister experiences is the terrible calamity that falls on some people. Parents are faced with a terrible illness that afflicts a child. Adults find themselves face-to-face with frightening and debilitating diseases. One of the awful aspects of all of this is that there seems to be no moral thread that runs through this. The innocent often suffer. The guilty often go scot-free. The words of Ecclesiastes have a haunting ring: “All things come alike to all.”

There is, however, another word in Scripture that stands over against the despair of Ecclesiastes. “All things work together for good,” writes the Apostle Paul, “to them who love God and are called according to his purposes.”

Certainly, Paul had not lived a life that was untouched by calamity. He had suffered much. As an apostle to the gentiles, he had been shipwrecked, beaten, imprisoned, and stoned. The churches that he had given his life to start often turned against him. But in spite of all of that he writes, “All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purposes.”

So here the writer of Ecclesiastes and Paul stand over against each other. Dealing with the same set of circumstances, one find cynicism and despair, the other faith and hope.

What then were the elements that entered in to Paul’s conviction?

II.

The first was his confidence in the grace of God he had experienced in Jesus Christ. The Christian witness is that the last word in every human situation is the grace of God. God’s grace is not only forgiveness and renewal, but also, as Reinhold Niebuhr says, “God’s providential

working in history by which he makes the wrath of man to praise him and transmutes good out of evil.”

The Christian faith stands on three very important convictions. The first is that God is the creator. He is the author of life. The second conviction is that God is the redeemer. He has brought salvation in Jesus Christ. The third conviction is that God provides, orders, and cares for us. This is what we mean by the providence of God. Faith in God’s providence is simply another aspect of the awareness that God is personal. There is nothing more important than this affirmation.

Our conviction about God’s intention is not grounded in our experience. Often our experience seems to contradict this. The capacity to affirm that “all things work for good for those who love him” is rooted in our experience of God’s presence in the saving work of God in Jesus Christ. Knowing God in Christ, we are led to affirm that this is our Father’s world and that he cares for us, provides for us, and does not abandon us.

One of the most powerful witnesses to the providence of God is found in the Old Testament story of Joseph that is related in Genesis 37-50. It is the story of a gifted young boy, who was betrayed by his brothers out of their jealousy of him. One day when Joseph was in the field with his brothers, they grabbed him and sold him to a band of Midianite traders who took him to Egypt. Through a remarkable series of events, Joseph rose to a place of prominence in Egypt, becoming the most trusted advisors to the Pharaoh. One day his brothers, who believed Joseph to be dead, went to Egypt in search of food. There was a great famine in Israel. Suddenly, unknown to them, they stood before Joseph, whom they did not recognize but who had the power of life and death over them. When Joseph finally confronted his brothers with his real identity, they were terrified. But Joseph replied with one of the most powerful sentences in the Bible. “You meant it to me for evil,” he said, “but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:10).

There is no more powerful witness to the capacity of God to work good out of evil than in that statement.

III.

There is another dimension to Paul’s capacity to affirm that all things work for good for those who love God. Paul, like Jesus, understood that there was certain impartiality to life. As Jesus pointed out the “rain falls on the just and the unjust.” But there are some things that do not come alike to all people.

It is true that death comes to all people. But not all people are remembered in the same way. Benedict Arnold and George Washington both died within a short time of each other. But they were not remembered in the same way. Benedict Arnold, who was a traitor to his country, died in London. They say that to his final day he kept the American uniform, in which he fought so valiantly at Saratoga, so that in the closing hours of his life, he took it out and held in his hands. But Benedict Arnold will always be remembered as a traitor to his country. That is his legacy.

George Washington left a far different legacy. “First in war, First in peace, First in the hearts of his countrymen.” He excelled as a soldier, as a statesman, and as a president. That is how Washington is remembered. Each year we remember his birthday and each year thousands of people flock to Mt. Vernon to pay their respects to the “Father of our Country.”

No, all things do not come alike to all.

Often young people are not aware of the legacy that they leave. But that legacy can be quite different. It is one thing to be the mother of Jesus, to watch with a broken heart her son crucified on a cross, and yet to thank God for the rest of her life for the honor that God gave her to bear such a son. It is another thing to be the mother of Judas and to have to bear for the rest of her days the terrible deed for which her son was responsible.

No, all things do not come alike to all.

IV.

There is another element of Paul’s conviction that God works for good in all things and it is Paul’s own love of God. The author of Ecclesiastes is convinced that “all things come alike to all people.” In many ways he sees himself as a victim.

Paul brings another perspective. He intends to bring to life his conviction that his love of God has shaped the way he views his life. All things have happened to him—joy and sorrow, prosperity and failure, ill health and good health, love and hate. All things have happened to him. He has been worshipped as a god and had been condemned as a devil. But in spite of what has happened to him, he is convinced that all things work together for good for those who love God.

Paul Tillich, in his book *The Shaking of the Foundations*, relates an experience after World War II in which he spoke to a group of Christian and Jewish refugees. One of these refugees, an eminent Jew from West Germany, told Tillich of a cablegram he had received from Southern France that informed him of the sudden evacuation from Germany of nearly ten thousand Jews, all ninety years old or older, who were all transported to a concentration camp. Most of these people died before they came to the camp. This Jewish man went on to say that the thought of such unimaginable suffering prevented him from being able to find any meaning in the notion of the providence of God.

Paul speaks of these forces. He understands them. He knows the horror of death and the anxiety of life. He knows them as well as we do.

But he knows something else as well. The content of faith in God’s providence is not some kind of vague promise that everything will work out well. There are some things that do not work out well at all. Nor is it the maintenance of hope in every situation. There are some situations in which there can be no hope.

The content of providence is this. When people are faced with some terrible illness or difficulty in their lives, when cruelty and war distort the lives of millions of people, as is

happening in our world today, even in these circumstances we can affirm that none of these things can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Providence does not mean that there is divine planning by which everything is predetermined, as if by an efficient machine. Rather, providence means that there is a saving and creative possibility implied in every situation, which cannot be destroyed by any event. It means that the demonic and destructive forces in our lives and in our world can never have an unbreakable grasp upon us and that the bond that connects us with God's love cannot be finally broken.

This love, as Paul points out, appears to us and is embodied in the words "in Christ our Lord." By saying this, Paul does not intend to be solemn. He says them because he knows that that is the only thing that can destroy our faith in God and in God's providence, is our disbelief in the love of God and our fear of God's wrath. It is not the depth of our suffering that separates us from God, but the depth of our separation that destroys our faith in Providence. For that reason the forgiveness of sin and providence are not two separate aspects of the Christian faith, they are one and the same—the certainty that we can reach eternal life in spite of our suffering and our sin.

There is nothing more important for each of us than the recovering of the notion that God is personal. He loves us. He cares for us. He provides for us.

That is the faith in Providence, and that alone.

Amen!