

My first professor of theology at St. Andrew's College was a man named Doug Hall. He left after that first year to accept a position in the Department of Religion at McGill University where he remained for the balance of his academic life. He became one of the United Church's best known theologians and developed a following throughout North America and Europe. He authored many books and articles including one book simply titled, *God and Human Suffering*. (slide) One of his insights from has stayed with me and became an important part of the information I shared with the chaplaincy students I taught. Hall suggests that not all suffering is the same and he helpfully divides the experience of suffering into three distinct categories. (slide)

The first category he calls "Chosen Suffering". By this he suggests that sometimes we choose events that will involve suffering because of their potential benefits. According to her frequent Facebook posts it would appear that Laura Foushe is suffering – from blisters, spider bites and a form of tendinitis. Although she did not know the exact nature of her suffering ahead of time, her decision to walk 400 kilometers on the Camino de Santiago, was certain to produce some suffering. It is likely that Laura weighed the risks and benefits and concluded that the potential for physical and spiritual renewal outweighed the suffering. Her suffering was *chosen*.

I have had a few friends who've made the conscious decision to have their hip opened up, the interior joint scraped and a slender spike with a ball attached driven into their thigh bone. There is little doubt that the surgery and recovery process involves a degree of suffering but my friends weighed the risks and benefits and concluded that the benefits outweighed the suffering. Their suffering was *chosen*.

As an observer of the news I have to conclude that many Syrians have experienced untold suffering over the last decade. Their towns have been invaded, their homes destroyed, their loved ones killed and they themselves forced to flee from everything they have known. Their suffering is likely greater than the suffering of anyone in this room, at least in terms of its all-encompassing oppression. (slide) Doug Hall suggests that although they did not choose this suffering yet, they know full well the source and cause of it – namely the tyrannical actions of President Bashar al Assad and a host of international accomplices. When these Syrians lament in anger and sadness they have a target for their complaints. While their suffering was not chosen, the source of their suffering is known and some acts of resistance are possible.

Dr. Hall's third category of suffering is what he calls (slide) unexplained suffering – suffering that is neither chosen nor for which there

is a known source. In our Spiritual Conversation group the other day a former nurse described her first encounter with unexplainable suffering. Working on the children's ward she grew affection for a young boy diagnosed with an incurable cancer. Contrasting his joyful spirit with the bodily assault he was experiencing, and seeing the potential of his young life contrasted against the reality of a terminal illness, caused this woman to ask "why"? In recent days we've seen unbelievable destruction in Florida in which homes have been destroyed by wind or flooded by water and where, at least a few, have lost their lives to the tyranny of nature's wrath. There is no good answer to why these events occur. An oncologist might explain the nature of a particular cancer, or a meteorologist might explain how hurricanes are formed, but the existential question of why me, why now, remains unanswered.

It is such a question that the ancient Biblical book of Job (slide) seeks to address. First let us be reminded that some of the books of the Bible are absolutely mythical. No credible scholar believes that God struck a deal with Satan to test Job. If we remove the spurious suggestion that God made such a bet and look instead at the calamities that confront Job – the loss of his business, the loss of his home, the death of his children, and his own painful illness - we realize that the author of Job is wrestling with the

same question about unexplainable suffering – why me, why now? (black slide)

The particular chapter we read this morning comes after the debate between God and Satan, after the calamities that beset Job, and after the advice of his three friends who insist that he must have sinned to produce such suffering. Throughout the Book, Job rejects the conclusions of his friends and maintains that he has been upright and faithful in his life. Even if God is a harsh judge, Job has done nothing to deserve such judgment. In today's passage Job laments and cries out to God to explain why he is suffering. He is filled with anger, righteous indignation, and despair and he wants to know WHY?

In many ways the Book of Job fails to provide a direct answer to the question of why – perhaps because no real answer exists to the question of unexplainable suffering. The book, however, does provide two important insights. One scholar writes: (slide) “At the heart of Job's complaint is neither that he is suffering, nor even that God would allow such a thing, but that (the God he believes in) feels absent.”

The second insight is that it is legitimate – even inevitable – to lament and grieve over our suffering. To this another scholar writes: (slide) “The

Book of Job is about having the freedom to feel and utter such thoughts (as bewilderment, despair and anger)". (black slide)

So what is our response to the unexplainable suffering that confronts us – to insidious cancer; or a catastrophic accident; or the unexpected collapse of a relationship? First, we should give ourselves permission to lament. The dictionary describes lament “as demonstrable sorrow.” Grief and righteous indignation are spontaneous gut-reactions when our life as we know it is threatened. Experts tell us we’ll cry or rage, bargain or challenge, doubt or withdraw as an expression of suffering and that it is good and *normal* for us to do that. These responses make us human, not unfaithful.

We will also ask “why”. It is part of our lament, part of our protest against what seems unfair and overwhelming. It’s ok to ask “why” yet, unlike chosen suffering or suffering from a known cause there is no answer to our question. It is ok to ask “why,” but only the question of “how” can be answered. How do I live in the midst of suffering? How do I live into tomorrow? I had the privilege for a few years of sitting with a group of parents known as Compassionate Friends. It was support group for parents whose children had died. Lament was strong, and every now and again the question of “why” circulated among the group. Those who

seemed to survive were those who asked how – how do I carry on from this unthinkable place. For one it was nothing more (or less) than loving the rest of their children with a fierce passion and a heightened sense of gratitude. For another it was a career change, a return to school and graduation as a pediatrician. To survive in the midst of suffering one must eventually shift the question from “Why” to “How.”

When it comes to God, the scholar I quoted above suggests that Job feels the absence of God. “If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides; I turn to the right but cannot see him.” God the noun, God the All-Powerful, All-Knowing entity is absent. Archibald Macleish wrote a stage play entitled “JB” which depicted a contemporary person who endured the same succession of losses as the Biblical character Job. JB experiences similar tragedies, is counselled unsuccessfully by hapless friends but eventually makes his way through. At the end, Macleish puts a twist in his play, and suggests that JB has one more thing he must do, he must forgive God. He must forgive God – not for being the architect of tragedy – but for not being the kind of God who can prevent suffering. Perhaps Macleish recognized that God-the-verb does not have that kind of power. The God Job wants is a Master who will

make things right, but what JB discovers is that the only God available is the one who stands next to us holding our hand.

To that end God-the-verb is awaiting nouns who will allow the power of love to be present in the most desperate of circumstances. I also had the privilege of being a friend to the ALS support group. These people told me that next only to the suffering of their disease, was the suffering that resulted when life-long friends failed to call or visit. Suffering can scare us off and so we must open ourselves to the God-power, the power of love, the power of gritty love, to confront unexplainable suffering.

Never have I known that quite so clearly as I have since this spring. Earlier this year the daughter of our best friends, and her husband, committed suicide. Seldom have I been in a space where grief has been more palatable, where suffering begged for an answer, where the silence was deafening. We continue as friends – we listen and hug, we love and laugh, we distract and we pay attention. It is our response to suffering. Slowly, ever so slowly, the suffering recedes in the face of the God whose power is love. Might we participate in such love when life calls us. Might we receive such love in our time of need. Amen.