

Pastor Roy's sermon from June 17, 2018 (Father's Day)

How do we know our fathers? Actions. Conversations. Times of celebration. Times of hardship. Sometimes it comes down to whether we have or had things in common that we enjoyed or if our personalities clashed or if we got along well. If we stop and consider, it's pretty personal how we know others. And the more effort we apply, the more keenly we listen, the better we will know another. It takes a good deal of grace too, because the better we know our fathers, the better we know their shadows, the more we have to forgive. Today, may we be filled with gratitude and mercy.

And God, how do we know God? We have the Scriptures which contain the faith stories and teachings of the pioneers of our faith, upon which our faith is built. The Spirit of God speaks to us through the Bible. That is the beginning, but only the beginning. Our mentors, teachers, pastors, parents, friends also help form our faith in God. Our experiences form our ways of relating to God. Traumas, profound suffering, faithfulness observed in others. All these make it simple or quite difficult to trust in a gracious, compassionate, merciful God who invites and welcomes all into a life giving relationship.

Ezekiel 17 speaks of God plucking a branch of faith and planting it where everyone will be helped. The Psalmist speaks of God lovingkindness and faithfulness. God's actions make the Psalmist glad and full of joy. God nurtures, God protects. But... will everything always go well for those who trust God? When it comes to the personal accidents and illnesses, we look for answers. Why? We often understand what happens. But the suffering and the randomness of suffering is a great challenge to the order we prefer.

People of faith have always been inclined to assign suffering to God's anger and punishment. The people of Israel are taken into exile by an invading army. The prophets had warned that faithlessness would be punished—that unjust practices against the poor and the alien would be the undoing of Israel. But other prophets questioned this theory of punishment. Lamentations wonders out loud that the punishment seems to exceed the offense. The victims of injustice received yet a greater injustice. How could all this be from the hand of God? Job asks the same questions and is vindicated in the end. But even Job goes too far and when he demands something like an apology from God.

The conclusion of the book of Job does not contain an explanation for suffering. The vision of God contains questions, where were you when I laid the foundation of the world? Do you understand how it all works? No? Hmm. Then you will simply have to trust in my provision. You will have to fall into my grace which, according to Paul, is sufficient. Thanks be to God for this grace and the love of God which brings us salvation and hope and peace. We are safe in the mercy of God not because of what we do but because of God's unconditional love. Amen.

[I wrote more for this sermon but did not end up using the following in either of the churches because the sermon seemed complete without it. It is of a more academic nature than pastoral, but I wrote it so here it is.]

There is one other narrative in the Bible which its writers and Saints have gone to great lengths to explain. Jesus' death. Jesus was beloved by his followers. Never before had they come face to face with such a powerful God presence as Him. Surely he would usher in the unstoppable, good reign of God. But he died, willingly, without resistance. How could this be? They were struggling to understand this. Even after they experienced his resurrection, his followers continued to push into a better understanding of why he died. The book of Acts, written some years after Jesus' death, implies that there was an immediate and clear understanding of Jesus' death right after the events, but these sermons preached by the early apostles are written by Luke to tell the story of the early church and are written from the perspective of the Apostle Paul with whom Luke travelled. John Mark, writer of Mark, perhaps an eyewitness to the crucifixion (Mark 15:51,52), also journeyed with the Apostle Paul.

We always want to understand, even things that cannot be understood. Jesus simply says in the first three gospels that his suffering and death is necessary, unavoidable. John says more (being written yet another generation later, the theology is more developed), that his death brings salvation to the world. Paul finds an explanation in the practice of sacrifice for the remission of sins. But might it be that this way of telling the story of Jesus' death is one explanation rather than THE explanation? Might it be that we would do well not to answer the question of "Why" to Jesus' death but to instead appreciate and respond to his passionate decision to stand with the very least, to refuse to back down, to offer his life because that is what he had to give, for the benefit of the world. We know Jesus' death and resurrection bring us salvation and life and hope, but I believe it is wise to hold back on the language of his death as satisfying the need for someone to take the punishment for sinners. The former is mystical, personal, and an expression of solidarity

and leadership in love. The latter suggests that God needs an external punishment—someone capable of paying a price—so that fellowship can be restored. The former is love in action. The latter is external justice bordering on sadistic. The former strikes me as divine, transcending human weakness, the latter feels enmeshed in human weakness and legalistic satisfaction. The way we read and listen to the writers who spoke to these matters (absolute versus exploratory/suggestive) influences our understanding of the broad voice of Scripture. Ultimately, the Spirit is still speaking to us today in an open, fluid fashion. The Scriptures reveal the Spirit working with the people of faith from 2000-3000 years ago. They do not lock up the Spirit and cast away the key. The invitation is to listen for how Love and Justice is speaking to us in our contemporary world with its fresh challenges and insights.

We can trust the love of Jesus mirrored in the lives of so many saints. If we find it hard to trust, we can open ourselves to God's faithfulness revealed in creation, in the Bible, in the Saints, some of whom, you are sitting beside.

Consider the love of Christ. Listen for the love of God. The love of the ages. A love that cannot be earned. A love that cannot be lost. Paul learned about this love through Jesus' death and resurrection. A fearless love that excluded no one. The love of Christ urges us on. Paul calls it salvation by faith in God's mercy. Jesus lived, he loved, he served without preferring some over others, without avoiding the difficult ones, or even the ones who would silence his preaching on the cross. So, he lived and died for the weak and the poor. He lived and died for rich and the powerful. In his death he proclaims the love of God which is free to all. He died for those convinced of their sinfulness. He died for those convinced of their own righteousness. He lived and died for us. To show us the way of justice and grace. Amen.