



WE WANT TO KNOW WHY

February 9, 2014, Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

I Corinthians 2:1-12

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Almighty God, You have set a path before us but too often we wander on our own to try to find our way. Too often we seek our own wisdom, think we have figured it all out, only to stumble and stray so far. Remind us, that we are always Your children, and that we have much to learn. Help us to seek wisdom in your Word, in the witness of one another, and to acknowledge that we need Your guidance. Open our hearts by your Spirit that we may be led once again. In the name of Christ, who is our companion on this journey of faith, we pray. Amen.

At the beginning of January I told the members of my Bible study that God and I were having some quiet time. Borrowing this quote from a friend, I let them in on a secret: my relationship with God is too important to let the tragedy of our family's story in the death of our baby girl this past December go unnoticed. I was holding God to account, and I needed some healing to take place in order to continue the conversation between the two of us again. God and I had some quiet time. I won't say that I've experienced complete healing as of this morning, but God and I are at least back on speaking terms again.

One of the reasons for that healing is the gift of community that has surrounded BJ, Hannah Ruth, and me these past few months. When we didn't have the energy to prepare dinner, someone else brought us food. When our daughter needed extra love and attention, friends were there to pick her up and play. When we didn't have the words to pray, we knew someone else was praying for us. When we were running out of strength, numerous cards and letters arrived in the mail expressing support. BJ and I leaned on and have been blessed by the gifts of the Church, and that's a large reason why we've experienced the healing we have.

But even though the community is there to weather the storm with us, when tragedy hits we all face heartbreaking realities, which we're left to reconcile as



individuals. As people of faith, we face them one on one with God. In one of my favorite movies, *Steel Magnolias*, Sally Field's character captures the intensity of this grief. If you know the movie, we the viewers watch this mother lose herself emotionally at her daughter's graveside. After the funeral, she remains by the casket when her friends come to surround her. When asked how she's doing, she responds with the typical "I'm fine." But that phrase soon escalates seconds later when the reality of her daughter's absence hits her. She begins to scream, shouting, "I'm so mad I don't know what to do." "I want to know why... Lord, I wish I could understand." In that moment, she captures much of what any of us think and struggle with when facing tragedy. We want to understand. We want to know why.

So when reading a text like today's from I Corinthians, at first glance I'm not sure I'm comforted when I hear that God's wisdom is secret and hidden. There are moments in our faith journey when we need to know why, when we need God to show up in miraculous ways, and a hidden secret doesn't satisfy. Out of desperation and grief we want answers and we lean on God to deliver them.

But as Helen said in the introduction to this text, there is a tension here between human wisdom and God's wisdom. Some of the people in the Corinthian community were seeking a different hidden wisdom, the secret to life if you will, and thinking they knew more than the others, they were being prideful. In this letter, Paul reminds them that any wisdom we have, any spiritual maturity we show, comes from God and God alone. Paul says he, himself, came to them in weakness and fear, but it was the Holy Spirit who gave him the strength and wisdom to speak truth. In other words, Paul says, we can't know it all, and even what we know comes as a gracious gift from God.

This brings up another reality for those of us who suffer. Often times when someone goes through tragedy, they are met by that unfortunate voice that offers statements like: "It was God's will", "Everything happens for a reason" or "It's all a part of God's plan." Just like the Corinthian community thought they could obtain some secret wisdom and know all things, people today act that way sometimes too. When we say these unfortunate statements to people in pain, we imply that we know what the will of God is, what the secret wisdom is. I read somewhere that the statement, "It was God's will", should only ever be uttered by



God, never us.¹ Honestly, I distrust people who have it all figured out, the ones who think there are answers to everything. I distrust the ones who think there's a reason behind everything we go through, some kind of nugget we're supposed to learn while we're suffering.

Paul reminds us in I Corinthians that God moves mysteriously, dancing, acting, breathing into our lives in ways that are rarely obvious. When we say things like, "It's all in God's plan" or "of course, everything happens for a reason" the assumption is that God's plan is obvious and that the reasons are staring us in the face. But to be honest, "To say that absolutely everything that happens in this world is part of God's 'perfect plan' is patently untrue. It's not even scriptural."²

In Scripture we find repeated examples of God's people thwarting God's plan and acting against God's will. It all begins in the garden when Adam and Eve disobey. But it continues. Jacob selfishly steals the birthright meant for his brother. King David kills Bathsheba's husband so that he can continue his affair with her. At the beginning of the Gospels, Joseph wants to leave Mary when he finds out she's pregnant with Jesus. And while following Jesus, the disciples try to send away the children, the hungry crowd of thousands on the hill, and the Canaanite woman.

Outside of the pages of Scripture there are more examples of events in this world that "cannot be reconciled with the will of God."³ God does not intend for families to sleep on the streets and go hungry. God does not want a spouse to bury their partner or a parent to bury their child. Friends, God does not intend for cancer, dementia, or addiction to tear apart families who are forced to watch disease take over a loved one. Too many events in this world remind us that God's will and our reality are not always the same thing. Yes, God is sovereign, but God's wisdom is

¹ Rev. Emily C. Heath, "Dealing With Grief: Five Things NOT To Say And Five Things To Say In A Trauma Involving Children", http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rev-emily-c-heath/dealing-with-grief-five-t_b_2303910.html

² Barrett, Elise Erikson. "What was Lost: a Christian Journey through Miscarriage." Westminster John Knox Press (September 2, 2010). Pg. 53.

³ Barrett, 53.



always mysterious. Please be very careful of naming as certain and clear that which is secret and hidden.

So then, what do we do with the fact that we still want to know why? How do we reconcile the secret wisdom of God with our need for comfort and peace in the midst of tragedy? While Paul has here written the Corinthians about a number of things, there's one truth that he uses to address them all: "Jesus Christ and him crucified."⁴ Paul preaches Jesus Christ, the one who came to seek the lost and comfort the afflicted. Jesus Christ who wept with those who mourned and healed the sick. Jesus Christ, who seemed foolish to those who thought they knew it all. Finally, friends, Paul preached Jesus Christ crucified, our Lord who knows what it means to suffer. There's no simplifying pain with this Jesus. There's no minimizing tragedy with this Jesus. In this Jesus there is love, comfort, and a deep recognition of what it is to suffer. We want to know why, yes. And although it may not always be clear, the hidden wisdom is found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

In the 14th and 15th centuries there was a well-known English mystic named Julian of Norwich. Julian lived in a time of turmoil, the Black Death and a series of peasant revolts rocked her society. In her own life, in her early 30s, Julian suffered a severe illness that left her, presumably, on her deathbed. In the midst of her illness she experienced a series of intense visions of Jesus Christ and his suffering. She recorded these visions in her book *The Revelations of Divine Love*, including this famous promise from God, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." Unlike the common thought of her day that suffering was a punishment that God inflicted, her theology spoke of God's love in

⁴ I Corinthians 2:2.



terms of joy and compassion. “Julian imagined a God of perfect mercy, all love, no wrath.”⁵

But what is often overlooked is that this promise: “all manner of thing shall be well.” didn’t come to Julian easily. It took many years, decades even, for her to share it with her neighbors. In her writings, she is proclaiming God’s promise that all will be well, but in a profoundly different way; not immediate, not in the midst of tragedy, but after much wisdom has come to pass. Healing and wisdom after tragedy do not happen overnight. This secret wisdom of God only came to Julian after many, many years of reflection, devotion, and prayer.

When tragedy hits I’m not comforted by someone who has it all figured out. I don’t want to hear from someone with easy answers or prideful wisdom. I would rather lean on those who are struggling their way through it just like me, searching and wondering and constantly questioning. They’re the ones who’ve been through the hard stuff and are still clinging to God, demanding God to show up in huge ways. They’re the ones who know that faith in times of suffering is “the awareness of just how much we don’t understand and how much we desperately want to.”⁶ When you’re in the thick of suffering, you don’t want someone with all the answers, you want someone who will sit in the ashes with you, someone who will let you question, let you scream, doubt, rage, and demand something real from God. Their presence might not always uncover the secret or hidden will of God, but it will let us experience the God of the cross who weeps with us. Because in our search to know why, we’re always drawing closer to the one in whom all mysteries are defined, all truth is revealed, Jesus the Christ.

Thanks be to God.

⁵ Rev. Michael Lindvall, also referencing this quote by Julian of Norwich in his sermon at Brick Presbyterian Church, April 8, 2012

<http://www.brickchurch.org/Customized/uploads/BrickChurch/Worship/Sermons/PDFs/2012/040812.pdf>

⁶ This quote is taken from the Reverend Erin M. Keys' 2014 Moveable Feast paper on 1 Corinthians 12:1-16 which she shared with me.