

March 13 – The Power of Love

Philippians 4:4-7

Adam Hamilton realizes that he has not answered all the “Why?” questions we have concerning the Will of God. He further notes that he has likely shaken the underpinnings of some people’s faith by asserting that all of our future is not part of God’s plan; that everything happens for a reason. He hopes by showing us how these ideas ultimately lead us to disappointment and anger with God, he has put us on a path where we embrace the idea that we are co-authors of our life’s story with God. Yet he knows that some of what he said still leaves people questioning so he wants to end this book with words of hope, hope in the power and transformative love of God; a love that will support us in times of struggle, a love that helps us to reach out to others in their time of need; and a love that fills us with reassurance. Let’s see how this works.

He begins by sharing a fact. Fear or its cousin worry, is a fundamental part of the human condition. We worry about ill health, about becoming disabled, or about getting dementia, to mention a few related to our human condition. We worry about family and friends, about the choices they need to make or have made. This fear causes us angst. It is part of life yet we hear often in the Bible, “Do not be afraid for God is with you.” It would be easy to get upset with God over words like this feeling God doesn’t really understand our life. It would also be easy for words like this to cause us to carry around a lot of guilt because we do fear and we are told we are not supposed to!

Hamilton wants us to focus not on the first part of that phrase, “Do not be afraid” but on the second part, “For God is with you.” Faith in God is the Christian response to fear. We are promised that as we experience God’s presence in our lives we will find that Peace that passes understanding.

Let me share a specific example of how this can work. A woman was facing surgery. She was really worried because the outcome was anything but certain. She told me about what happened the night before her surgery. She was running through the “what ifs” one more time in her mind. All of a sudden she felt the presence of God surrounding her. She realized God was with her, God was with the surgeons, and God

was with and would continue to be with her family. She realized that whatever happened, they would be all right. That feeling of love and God's presence gave her a sense of peace. She could face the unknowns of tomorrow knowing that whatever happened she was not alone.

Hamilton follows up on this idea of the presence of God driving out fear by reminding us again that God promises to work through us. He again talks about God nudges. As we respond to nudges from God we are often agents of God helping others in their time of struggle and suffering. We are a reminder that God is with them and we hope that this gives them peace. Likewise, when it is our time of struggles and we can't get on top of our worry, be open to how God is using other people to help you. If I have one big complaint against many of you it is that you are too independent and too stubborn to admit it! When someone is in need you are all so gracious and willing to help. It is a beautiful thing to see. But when the shoe is on the other foot... It feels at times as if I have to force some of you to take any help. You struggle on alone when God hears your prayers and is trying to help. I don't know how many times I have had to remind a person that being a willing recipient of another's love and care helps the giver as much as the one receiving. By accepting help they are doing a service and helping both giver and receiver to grow in faith, be aware of the love of God at work in their lives and find a sense of peace.

Suffering, pain, loss and death are a part of living. Because we live on a dynamic planet, we have bodies that age, we or others sometimes make poor choices, we struggle. All of these issues result in challenges we must deal with. As much as this is part of life God doesn't make suffering the winner. God forces evil and suffering to serve us.

When I first read this I thought, really? But then I think about all the ways that this is true. Now I am not saying it happens every time but think about all the ways God brings good from evil. A student is picked on because of a disability and the student body responds by electing them student body president. Or think of the laws that get enacted after horrific crimes so that what happened will have less of a chance of occurring again. All of these examples are reminders of the way God is saying evil does

not have the last word. And always, there is the possibility that God takes our sorrow and suffering and redeems it and sanctifies us through it. Sorrow and suffering and loss can destroy people. I know because I have seen it. But as tragic as that is, that is the rare exception. What I mostly see is how people learn and grow beyond the pain of today. Sometimes it takes years but when people continue to ask God into their lives I see the redemptive power of love.

I see and read about people who learn to forgive another when they thought that was never possible. I see how people learn from the challenges of life and use those experiences to make them a better person. I see how people learn from poor decisions and vow to never make the same ones again.

I want you to take a moment and think about how you have learned and grown from the challenges of life. For most of us those difficulties are really the building blocks of who we are today. Wonderful things happening to us do not seem to have the same power to shape us as do trials. It is this awareness of how God's love is always redeeming us and helping us is what Hamilton means when he says God bends evil and suffering to serve us.

I know we are a few weeks before Easter but Hamilton talks about the ultimate triumph of God's will. He likes to quote Frederick Buechner who is someone I like as well. The quote is "Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing."

Think about what that means for you. Picture your worst fear. Even if it comes true it isn't the last thing in your life journey. Think about those around you. This means that you have the opportunity to be part of the next part of their story beyond their worst thing. Think about those surrounding you, they can have a part to play in your story after the worst thing. And because of this we have hope. And if the worst thing means our death, resurrection means we find life.

I have shared this story before but I think it is worth sharing again. Early in my ministry I got to know Eva, the first of many Evas in my ministry. She called me one day and said, "Preacher, I got some good news today at the doctor. I have terminal cancer and have five years to live." I was silent. What do you say to something like that? Noting

my silence she said, "I am 90 years old. We all have to die sometime. I now know when I am going to die. The doctor has said that I should not have much in the way of pain or discomfort until real close to the end. So I am not thinking about the dying I am thinking about living." And for the next four years that is what she did. She didn't have to be so careful with her savings because she knew how far it needed to stretch. She had never flown before but now she flew to see all of her children and grandchildren. The reason she had not flown before was she was afraid to die, not now! Her grandchildren and greats loved having her in their homes. I still remember our last visit. She was in the hospital, the pain was getting bad. The doctors informed her it was time for the heavy duty pain meds and they would knock her out. She wanted to talk to me before they did that. I got to the hospital. She motioned for me to bend down. I thought she was going to whisper something to me. Instead she gave me a kiss on the lips and said, "See you in heaven!" And then she motioned for them to start the pain meds. She passed just a few days later. At her funeral there were lots of laughs, no real tears, because she had lived and died on her terms. She taught us all how to live, to conquer your fears, to celebrate life in the face of death because you believe God is with you.

Love is the ultimate victor, not suffering, not evil, and not even death. Because resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing. That knowledge helps us answer or at least come to terms with many of the "Why" questions we have associated with the Will of God.