Why Is There So Much Hurt?
Rev. Chandler Stokes
Matthew 13:24-30
The Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time  November 9, 2014
In our confirmation series on questions, we begin today’s service with some of the most difficult questions that Scripture helps us voice. The first is from Job. The second is from Mark’s gospel.

Opening Sentences
Job 7:20-21

…what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?  
Why have you made me [a] target?  
Why have I become a burden to you?  
21 Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity?”

Mark 15:33-34

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 34 At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Scripture Introduction

We are about to hear the Parable of the Wheat and Weeds from Matthew 13. Later in the same chapter, Jesus explains this story. He makes it clear that this parable is a pastoral response to the disciples’ experience of evil in the world. Jesus promises that in the end, evil is defeated and the good are gathered like wheat; he promises they will “shine like the sun.” But more importantly for today, it becomes evident in Jesus’ later explanation that the slaves’ question in this parable, “Where did these weeds come from?” is the disciples’ own question to God, “Why is there evil?”

Scripture

24 Jesus put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. 27 And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ 28 He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’

“The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ 29 But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. 30 Let both of them grow
Why Is There So Much Hurt?

together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, ‘Collect the weeds first and
bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

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Our confirmation series is about questions. We began today’s service with the deep questions from Job in his suffering and Jesus in his. Their cries come with darkness over the land, long before daybreak. We are here first to bless these questions and then to proclaim the gospel in these shadows.

We began our series with Sherrill Vore’s important insight that somewhere along your journey, you will question what you believe. Sometime in your lifetime of faith, you will find yourself shaken by a question you can’t answer. We’re saying it again, because, when the hard, shaking question comes, it may help to remember that deep questioning is part of our life in faith.

You may be blessed to feel the presence of God even in the worst of times. Even when you are shaking with questions, or rage, or fear, or sorrow, you may feel God hovering around you. But there likely will come a time when you sense God is absent—and it may seem that all you have are questions in the dark.

In 1983, Karen and I moved to a small town in northern California, where we met Bill and Nonie Hunter. Bill became our doctor and became a member of the little church we served. And he also became our singing partner. Bill’s a fine singer. Bill’s house was way out in the hills, so when he was on call at the hospital, he stayed at our house. And we would stay up late nights, singing together, until he got a call to come in.

He and Noni struggled a long time to have a second child, and then Nina was born. But shortly after birth, Nina developed an infection. And, even after heroic efforts, flying her to San Francisco, she died at eight days. Bill was both her father and her doctor.

Bill taught me about suffering. We were all young parents together, and he let us in close, while he suffered over Nina’s death. In the following years, Nina would come up in conversation. One time Bill told me, “I’ve been asking ‘Why?’ for so long now. You can’t really help but ask it. You want to know why. Why did Nina die?” That was his shaking question.

I don’t how parents go on; it seems the worst of human pain. Why do any children die? Whether they die because of war, or disease, or infection, or genetics, why? Some why’s are a little easier to answer: We are too selfish and fearful to keep from war. We lack the political will to address extreme poverty. But other deaths are not so easy. Why Nina? I want to bless Bill’s questioning.

We began today’s service with Job’s questions. Among his many sufferings, Job lost all his children, and like Bill, he rightly asked, “Why?” The drawing on the cover of the bulletin today is of Job and his “friends.” Each “friend” is clearly disappointed in Job for questioning God about his suffering, for asking, Why? Or angry with Job or think him a fool for asking. Look at those faces—it’s an eloquent drawing.

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Why Is There So Much Hurt?

Job's friends are no friends at all, of course. Their disappointment in Job at what they perceive as his lack of faith is cruel; it is a bit like telling Jesus on the cross, “Don't ask 'Why have you forsaken me?' It's unfaithful to ask 'Why?'"

But, if ever there were a witness to the propriety of asking, “Why?,” Jesus' words on the cross are that testimony.

Jesus asked, “Why?” It's part of us. It is part of our true, deep humanity. It is not unfaithful to ask, “Why?” There is no point in Job's story at which God tells Job not to ask. It is fully human to ask. As Professor Tom Long says, “There is more honest faith in an act of questioning than in the act of silent submission, for implicit in the very asking is the faith that some light can be given.”

"Why?,” when we are hollering or sobbing in God's face, is a holy question. Asking “Why?” is part of our relationship with God. Job loves God. Unlike his friends, Job is willing, if he must, to give up his theology and to question his understanding, but he will not give up his God. Even if grief and pain lead us to experience forsakenness, to feel the absence of God, asking the question maintains the relationship; to ask is still to turn toward God. Again, as Tom Long says, “For Christians, all theological questions are forms of prayer”—that is, the questions are addressed to God. They are blessed.

My friend Bill simply said, “You can't help but ask why.”

But he also said, “Chandler, every answer I found to that question was a dead end. There wasn't an answer that led back into life. When it came to the medicine..., when it came to God, either God was completely cruel or God didn't exist.” Dead ends. Asking the question is good, but there are some really bad answers to the question of why people suffer. And Bill, thankfully, had the wisdom to see how bad they were, that they were dead ends.

You've heard them.

Some of those bad answers make God out to be a monster, one who causes suffering as some callous way to teach us, or who punishes us for every broken piece of life, or who selfishly takes those we love. Those dead-end answers are the ones from Job's so-called friends. And in some way or another they make God the cause of evil.

I do believe that God can turn any evil, any tragedy, any shadow of death into daybreak. I believe God can and does enter into what is tragic and bring resurrection power that changes things, moves us out of

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tragedy and toward hope and life and love, but I do not believe that God causes those evils. I prefer the answer from today's Scripture—it is a gospel word.⁵

Again, the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds is a pastoral conversation between Jesus and his disciples about evil in the world.⁶ And the question the parable first addresses is ours: “God, did you cause this?”

We are told that the householder sowed good seed in his field, but that an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. And when the slaves saw the weeds grow up, they said, “Did you not sow good? Where’d this evil come from?” And the householder repeated the parable’s assertion and answered, “An enemy has done this.” An enemy.

The parable goes on to say more. It says that God promises to do something about the evil, and promises that the good will be gathered in and that in the end the good will shine like the sun. And that’s our topic for next week: the faith we bear in this shadowy world.

For today, we stay with this first simple statement: “An enemy has done this.”

Professor Long writes:

Seen as a disclosure about the character of the landowner, and thus the moral character of God, [this] is good news indeed. Sometimes Christians try to “solve” the problem [of evil] by trying to figure out why God would cause or allow evil to happen. Maybe God is sending sorrow to shape our character..., or perhaps God placed evil in the world to make choosing the good a meaningful moral decision, or maybe we don’t understand it now, but eventually we’ll know how it is that these sufferings were part of God’s good plan all along.

To all of these justifications of evil, the parable gives a resounding “No!” The cancer that takes a young mother's life, the child brutalized by the predator, the gas ovens at Auschwitz—these are not part of God’s “plan”; we will not find out by and by how these events just seemed to be evil but were actually part of the fabric of good.⁷

No, it is clear that there are things in this world that are not the friend of God. “Evil is God's enemy, period.”⁸ That is gospel. That is good news, in part because it sweeps away so many of the dead-end answers. God does not send evil.

My friend Bill simply said, “You can't help but ask why.” And I believe he asked that question as faithfully as Christ from the cross asked “Why?” And then again, Bill said, “Chandler, every answer to

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⁵ And in particular Tom Long’s view of this parable in What Shall We Say?: Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith.


that question led to a dead end.” Bill had heard or worked out each of those dead-end answers that Professor Long described. “Each answer to the question was a dead end,” he said. “But then,” he said, “over time, the question changed. Somehow, over time, the question changed.”

Roy Fairchild was Professor of Pastoral Psychology when I was in seminary. Dr. Fairchild taught that, when we are confronted with suffering, it is a critical stage in our spiritual growth to move from the question, “Why?” to the question, “What now?”

I don’t know exactly what the question changed into for Bill, but he found his way back into life. For him, the critical step was just letting the “Why?” question go, but I suspect that the question turned into something like Dr. Fairchild suggested—it turned from “Why?” into “What now?”

Some thirty years ago Candy Lichter’s thirteen-year-old daughter, Cari, was run over and killed by a drunk driver. That terrible loss no doubt paralyzed her mother while she asked that hard question, Why? But later, somehow, Candy Lichter began a journey that became Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Sometime after her daughter’s death, Candy was able to ask, “What now?”

When White House Press Secretary James Brady was shot and permanently disabled in the assassination attempt on President Reagan, Brady’s wife Sara, sometime after that, began a campaign that became the Brady Bill on handgun control. She asked, “What now?”

When I served the church in Napa, I met the Mitchells. Their son Doug had Down syndrome. When I met Doug, he was about 25. He couldn’t speak words that I could grasp, but he made strange and beautiful sounds. He had ethereal glossolalia, but Doug could never say, “I love you” to his mom. He couldn’t express his interior life.

Nevertheless, everyone in his family testified that Doug’s life, Doug’s syndrome, had made them family; they said that before he was born, they were fragmented individuals, but Doug had drawn the best out of them and made them a family, valuing more than success, and intellect, and status.

I believe what the parable says, “An enemy has done this.” God did not cause Cari’s death or shoot James Brady. God did not give Doug Down syndrome. When there is suffering, if we want to know where God is—it is in the suffering, not the causing. Remember the older brother’s simple response to his little brother way back at the start of this series: “No one’s ever seen God, that’s what Jesus is for.” So, look at Jesus. He doesn’t cause suffering. He himself suffers.

As Christians, we affirm that God is in our suffering. In it. Not aloof, not manipulating events to teach us or exact payment. God is in our suffering, as Christ made clear in his crucifixion and death. And then, as we surely know that Christ’s story does not end with crucifixion and death, clearly, we know there is more good news beyond that suffering in healing and more.

So, to sum this up, as surely as Christ faithfully turns to God in pain and cries out, “Why? God, why?” so Bill and we rightly cry out too.
Why Is There So Much Hurt?

And then an important step in our spiritual growth is to move from Why? to What now? Like the gracious turning of the earth to daybreak, somehow the question can change. And maybe even in that change, for a moment, we sense the dawning love and healing presence of God.

And finally, in the crucifixion, we know that God is in our suffering and not causing it, and, moreover, in Christ we know at least one thing more. There is not only the healing and the dawning hope in moving to the question, “What now?”, in moving to the question that led Candi and Sara and Bill back into life, but there is also, “What then?”

What then? God is not only in our suffering.

We witness not only that Christ suffered, but also that Christ was raised from the dead. Ultimately, as the parable affirms, God is victorious. There is not only daybreak, but “the righteous will shine like the sun.” 9 Love is victorious. Ultimately, the daybreak comes from the shadow of death. Dawn comes and then even high noon. Christ is raised triumphant.

When we ask “What now?” maybe we begin to heal and see daybreak emerging from Candi’s and Sara’s and Bill’s tragedies, but there is more.

There is the “what then?”

In the noonday heart of God, Cari Lichter lives. James Brady walks. And someday in the heart of God, Doug Mitchell will say, “I love you, Mom.” And Nina Hunter? Like her daddy, Nina sings like a bird. And they all shine like the sun.

This is the Good News of the Gospel. Let the people say, Amen.

Prayers of the People
Sherrill Vore

Holy God, sometimes we don’t know how to pray. Even in this beautiful space, gathered into a waiting silence, surround by others who are earnest and expectant...even now we are sometimes unsure of our words and, perhaps, of our hearts. We are grateful for all that so clearly blesses us and enriches our lives—for the countless ways in which we know the truth of your grace and your steadfast presence. But our hearts are troubled by the depth of pain that we see in our world; that we know too well, ourselves. With minds trained to weigh and reason, to trace cause and effect, we come close to despair when we acknowledge all of which we cannot make sense. So we ask in deep humility and hope, Lord, that your Spirit will move among us this day and teach us to pray.

You who chose to be God With Us, teach us to trust that we can and should bring our anger to you with as much abandon as we bring our thanksgiving. Let our prayers name our sorrows, our disbelief of their place in your intended order. Help us to remember that in the body of Christ you knew this world and joined in its sorrow and pain.

God of love, teach us to be attentive—and mindful—so that our prayer will be grounded in what is real in our daily living. Buoyed by everyday kindesses and joys make us ready to notice and resist the small injustices that furrow the ground, making it ready to grow resentment, indignity and sorrow. Please do not let us become so overwhelmed by the pain of the world that we cope by ignoring it; so hurt by the pain of our own lives that we begin to drift through our time instead of claiming it and naming it holy.

We do believe that there was no evil in the dawn of your creating and that there will be no evil in the fullness of your kingdom. Yet we live in between those timeless points, so teach us to open our hearts to you, to pray through the evil in our world and toward your great healing and your peace. Teach us, God of Hope, to pray the words that Jesus taught us to say as we turn to you in love and in our need:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

10 This insight is offered by Thomas Long in his book What Shall We Say?