

Sermon for May 4th 2008
John 11:1-17

Today, May 4th 2008, is the seventh Sunday of the Easter Season. It is hard to believe that it has been six weeks since Easter Sunday. A lot has transpired here at St. John's in these last six weeks.

One way that I deal with an overload of grief, or an abundance of joy, or conflicting thoughts, or unwanted anxiety, is to journal and I have had the opportunity to reflect and journal over the last week and, although I knew we had been through a lot, writing things down made it abundantly more clear to me just how much we as a parish family have been through in a very short amount of time.

In the five short months that I have been a priest in this church we have had 11 deaths, 7 of which have been in the last six weeks since Easter Sunday.

Two weeks ago, Michael preached an eloquent sermon in which he expressed his belief that preaching is never easy and that the single most important thing a preacher can bring to the pulpit is authenticity.

You may have seen me nodding my head when he said that. I could not agree more and have strived in my short time thus far as a preacher, to preach from the heart and with authenticity. Therefore as I was trying to think of words to say to all of you this morning, after two more deaths in the last ten days of beloved family members of this parish, I too realized that I could not stand up here today and genuinely preach the gospel without addressing grief and suffering.

I do not think that it is a mere coincidence that our gospel lesson for today is what it is. It never ceases to amaze me how at certain times in my life, or the life of the Church a particular scripture lesson comes up that fits exactly the situation in which we are living. Today's gospel lesson in which Jesus prays to God is no exception.

The gospel lesson begins today by saying "After Jesus had spoken these words". The words that Jesus has just spoken to his disciples were these:

"The hour is coming and indeed it has come when you will be scattered and you will leave me alone – yet I am not alone because the father is with me. I have said these things so that you may have peace. In the world you face persecution, but take courage for I have conquered the world."

And with that, Jesus looked up to heaven and prayed the prayer we heard in our gospel lesson this morning. It is a prayer in which Jesus begins by asking God to glorify Him so that others may have eternal life by knowing God through Jesus.

Jesus then launches into a beautiful heartfelt prayer for his disciples... his beloved friends whom he knows are going to go through much suffering and pain within just a few short hours.

Jesus said this prayer just after he and his disciples broke bread and drank wine together at the last supper and just before Jesus entered the Garden of Gethsemane where he would fall on his knees in agony and call out to God in prayer again.

It is during these times of deep despair that the questions come to our minds and understandably so... we ask over and over why God? Why must we go through this? Or we call out in the night, Where are you God? Are you with me? Have you abandoned me? Where are you God?

Theologians over the centuries have attempted to answer the “why is there suffering in the world” question. I have read all different theories on why there is suffering and I have yet to find a theodicy (an attempt to justify God’s actions) that has fully answered this question.

There is the free will defense for suffering which argues that God gives us free will because love is not something that can be programmed or compelled and it is this free will that causes us to sin and therefore causes the suffering.

I do believe that God desires us to have loving relationships and that God gives us the gift of free will, however this theory of free will being the only cause of suffering is not sufficient enough to explain to me the sheer range of suffering in our world. This explanation does not adequately allow for natural disasters, or illness or death.

There also those who say there is suffering in the world in order to allow us to know what it is to be filled with joy, but to be honest, when I have been in the midst of deep suffering this answer too falls short for me. This answer does not meet the full force of tragedy and suffering we face in this world. I will never be convinced that something as tragic and evil as the holocaust, for example, happened in order that people would understand what it is to know joy.

For most theologians the problem of why there is suffering, is just that – a difficult problem. For me, the question of why there is suffering is a necessary, gut wrenching, mind boggling question, of which I believe we may never find the answer to.

However as for an answer to the second question- the “where are you God in the midst of suffering” question – the story is completely different. For an answer to this question we can look right to this very prayer of Jesus prayed in our Gospel lesson today.

Jesus tells his disciples just before he is going to suffer an excruciating death, that he knows that he is not alone. He knows that God is with him. Jesus tells them this so that they will know that they will never be left alone either no matter how much suffering they would endure. We have a savior who knows exactly what we are going through when we suffer because He suffered too; and He promises us He will never ever abandon us.

A writer named Arthur Gossip puts it like this:

What Christ kept seeking to bring home to our minds is this, that what our little ones are to us, not less than that are we to God; that each of us holds his or her own secure place in God's heart, a place that nobody except him or herself can ever fill; that it matters to God what becomes of us and how we fare, it matters the length of Calvary; so we do hold a central place in the heart of the great God whose property it is to be able to give himself to all of us, to each of us, as if there were no other in the

world – just God and you, just God and I. Believe that, and the whole incredible gospel becomes possible, and thinkable and likely. And it was Jesus Christ who made sure that it is really true.

These words of Arthur Gossip portray God’s love for us and an answer to the question of “where are you God in the midst of suffering.”

This prayer of Jesus’ that we heard today allows us to know with full confidence where God is right now in the midst of our very own lives. God is right here... right now. God will remain with us as we go forth living, loving and longing. God is with us as we go forward calling out our questions to God in grief. When we are too spent to utter one more sound, pray one more word, or cry one more tear, God is with us and will carry us through. And we can find peace and hope knowing that God will remain with us until the very end when we will find eternal bliss and no more suffering.

“Jesus said to his beloved disciples: yet I am not alone because the father is with me. I have said these things so that you may have peace. In the world you face persecution, but take courage for I have conquered the world.”