

LEARNING FROM ADVERSITY

Romans 5:1-5

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I planned this sermon about six weeks ago. I chose this topic, “what do we learn from life’s most difficult moments?” because it’s one of the questions I’m asked most frequently. Usually the question comes at me another way, though: “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Or more personally, “I’ve tried so hard to be a good person; I don’t understand why this is happening.” “This” could be cancer - or another disease, unemployment- or bankruptcy or another financial burden, estrangement from a child or friend, the death of a loved one.

My answer is always the same, but it’s not a matter of having the correct answer. My answer is always, “God didn’t cause this to happen. God is not the master puppeteer pulling the strings of our lives. God isn’t doling out rewards and punishments.” God has set the world in motion. Good things happen, bad things happen, and God is in the midst of it all, as the spirit of love. God is celebrating with us, making our joy more complete, and God is the great consoler, drying our tears, and God is the one who motivates us to justice, stirring us to righteous anger.

God does not cause bad things to happen, everything DOES NOT happen for a reason, but that doesn’t mean that we can’t learn from everything that happens to us in this life. We can use every experience to expand our hearts, to enlarge our understanding of humanity, to deepen our empathy.

I was moved by a commencement speech Sheryl Sandberg delivered last month at the University of California, almost exactly one year after her husband died, quite unexpectedly, at age 47. Sandberg, an author and Facebook executive, talked to the students about what she has learned in the year since her husband's death. The first lesson is about choice. We can't choose much of what happens to us in this life, but we can choose our attitude, we can choose how we will respond. Here's what she said:

"I learned about the depths of sadness and the brutality of loss. But I also learned that when life sucks you under, you can kick against the bottom, break the surface, and breathe again. I learned that in the face of the void — or in the face of any challenge — you can choose joy and meaning.

I'm sharing this with you in the hope that today, as you take the next step in your life, you can learn the lessons that I learned only in death. Lessons about hope, strength, and the light within us that will not be extinguished."

She then reminded these young graduates that each one of them will face adversity:

"There's loss of opportunity: the job that doesn't work out, the illness or accident that changes everything in an instant. There's loss of dignity: the sharp sting of prejudice when it happens. There's loss of love. And sometimes there's loss of life itself."

Adversity, says Sandberg, can make us stronger. We can learn from life's most difficult moments lessons about what matters most:

"For the first time, I am grateful for each breath in and out — grateful for the gift of life itself. I used to celebrate my birthday every five years, and friends' birthdays some-

times. Now I celebrate always. I used to go to sleep worrying about all the things I messed up that day — and trust me, that list was often quite long. Now I try hard to focus on each day's moments of joy.

It is the greatest irony of my life that losing my husband helped me find deeper gratitude — gratitude for the kindness of my friends, the love of my family, the laughter of my children. My hope for you is that you can find that gratitude — not just on the good days, but on the hard ones, when you will really need it. I hope that you live your life — each precious day of it — with joy and meaning. And when the challenges come, I hope you remember that anchored deep within you is the ability to learn and grow. You are not born with a fixed amount of resilience. Like a muscle, you can build it up, draw on it when you need it. In that process you will figure out who you really are — and you just might become the very best version of yourself.”

The book of Romans says that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. Again, suffering is not God's way of teaching us a lesson. But still we can learn. It is the goal of human life, to learn from every experience.

What is hard if when the challenges keep coming, one after another. And some lives seem to have more than their share, don't they? We all know people who - through absolutely no fault of their own - face one crisis after another. It's wearing, it's wearying.

As a nation, we are at that point, aren't we? Crisis fatigue. One of my colleagues said the other day, “Here's something they don't teach us in seminary - what to say on a

Sunday morning, when your sermon is already written, and there's another horrible violent tragedy.”

And it has happened again. We weren't aware, as we gathered in this room last Sunday morning, of just what had occurred in Orlando. But now we know. We know that a United States citizen, armed with an assault rifle, mowed down 49 people and injured 53 others, most of them young, most of them Latino, most of them gay - each of them beautiful children of God. We know that the killer invoked the name ISIS and we know that he paused in the middle of the rampage to check Facebook to see if his horrific events had yet made him popular.

In the past week, there have been some heartwarming stories of kindness in response to this tragedy. You may have heard about the grandmother of one of the youngest victims: 20 year-old Luis Omar Ocasio-Capo. She boarded a JetBlue flight to head to Orlando for her grandson's funeral. A flight attendant quietly let all of the other passengers know she was on board. Every single one of them wrote her a condolence message during the course of the flight.

In fact, JetBlue offered free flights for all of the victims' relatives, and there have been other donations of cash, and people are giving blood.

But there have been other responses, too. One so-called Christian pastor, whose hate knows no bounds, publicly celebrated the deaths of the Orlando victims, because of their sexuality. He's not the only one who said something so reprehensible. Is he a minority? Yes, thank goodness. But we need to acknowledge that there are Christian extremists, too, people who are using the name "Christian" to spew their vile, disturbing messages. To some, the word "Christian" is synonymous with "intolerant" or "judgmental."

We need to show the world that there are other kinds of Christians. We have to be louder, we have to be stronger, we have to be more articulate, we have to be loving - in our words and with our actions. We have to show the world that the God we worship is a God of love. We have to show the world that the Jesus we follow is one who always stood up and spoke up for the outcast. We have to show the world that love is stronger than hate.

We don't have to agree on a political solution. Some of you may think the answer is a better diplomatic or military response to ISIS, some of you may think the answer is better and stiffer gun control legislation, some of you may think the answer is finding ways to catch these lone wolf types and give them mental health treatment before they hurt others. But we have to agree that we have a problem and that the problem will require all of us working together. As one of my colleagues wrote this week, and I agree, "There is something in the soul of our country that is festering and ugly and evil...there is a proliferation of hatred, intolerance and misappropriated religion."*

And it's not just our country, of course. There was a tragedy in England this week. This is Jo Cox, a dynamic British politician and mother of two, who worked with Syrian refugees. She was stabbed to death on Thursday.

Two weeks ago, Doug and I spent the weekend in New York City; we were there for the wedding of the son of good friends. While there, we visited the 9/11 Memorial and Museum. It is a beautiful space, a fitting tribute to those who died, as moving as visiting the Holocaust museum. I was reminded of how our country came together after the events of September 11, 2001. People donated blood, people gave money, there was a palpable sense of unity

But, sadly, tragically, not only did that unity not last, do you agree that we have in fact gone backwards? That we are more divided than we ever were before 2001? It is time for us to remind ourselves of this nation's best ideals. "It is time for us to arm ourselves, not with weapons, but with all that our faith has taught us and all that has made this country strong – justice, tolerance, diversity, the audacious belief that we can embody God's highest hopes for our world. And let us boldly insist on a complete rejection of any ideology that even suggests anything other than this: every person is a beloved child of God, always welcomed into relationship and community."*

It was a hard week for all of us, as we grappled with this latest national adversity. It was heart-wrenching to read the stories, watch the news, see the faces of the victims. It was painful to hear the divisive political rhetoric. It is wearying to feel helpless and hopeless. I had something to look forward to, though. I left Thursday morning to spend 24 hours with our senior high mission trip team. I was so impressed by each one of them. 109 people working hard, treating each other well, creating hope each day. Each day the whole team descended on someone's property - to paint, to rehab, to build a retaining wall, to roof, to build a ramp. To give hope. Hope to the homeowner. Hope to the passers-by. It gave hope to me. In July you'll hear their stories first-hand and see their pictures. It will give you hope, too.

This is what we do as a church. We let the world know that hate does not have the last word, that people who follow Jesus are people of love. Through our prayers, our words, our giving, our actions, we are lighting a weary world. Amen.

*words from the Rev. Amy Butler, Riverside Church, NY