

26 April 2020

Looking for God . . . In Human Sin
Galatians 5:1, 13-23

Last week, in our series on looking for God in the midst of crisis, we asked about the question of suffering. That is, why does God permit pain? How could a good and loving God create a world like this, in which there are such things as famine, premature death, and terrifying new pandemics? Well, I'm not sure that the responses I gave last week will be helpful to anyone, but I'm not repeating them today. That's the good thing about sermons recorded online: if you're interested, look it up. No, today I want to take on an even harder question, part two of the question of suffering. You see, while much suffering is caused by natural disaster, much more is caused by . . . well, by us. Suffering caused by humans includes war, murder, abuse, rape, slavery, oppression of the weak, racism, genocide, holocaust. In some ways this sort of suffering is worse than that caused by earthquakes, because while no really thinks an earthquake is malevolent, actively trying to cause pain, that's not necessarily true of humans. So today, we move from suffering that is the result of nature to suffering that is the result of *human* nature. We leave the problem of suffering and take up the problem of evil.

How could God permit the Armenian genocide? The Holocaust? Genocide in our own time of the Uighurs, the Yazidi, the Tutsis, and the Rohingya? How can God sit idly by and do nothing while his children murder, enslave, oppress, and abuse his other children? Why doesn't God intervene when infants are torn from their parents' arms and put into cages at the border, or when unborn babies are scientifically executed because they are inconvenient? (And, by the way, those of you who were shocked by one of those examples but are perfectly fine with the other – maybe ask yourself why that is.) The point is that God has not only created a world in which natural accidents cause suffering but has also established a dominant race in that world that causes more and deeper suffering, and sometimes delights in doing so. What was God thinking? Why did God create human beings with such obvious design flaws?

For many Christians, the short answer is that God created us with free will. That is, we were made in the Image of God, so that we could become true companions, friends, of God in a loving relationship with our Maker. But love, by definition, must be given freely. Mandated love is called abuse. So, to give us the capacity to love, God created us with free will. The downside to that, of course, is that freedom to love has to include freedom not to love. If we aren't free to reject God, then we aren't really free to love God either. As I say, that's the usual answer, and as far as it goes, I believe it. But I also think it's not quite that simple, and we need to go deeper.

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If we're going to argue that our free will is why we have human-instigated suffering, it would probably be helpful to think about what we mean by the concept of freedom. Many philosophers accept the classical definition of freedom: "Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose. Nothin' ain't worth nothin', but it's free." Deep stuff. But, on the off chance that that's not enough for everyone, let's ask, "How do we normally use the word?" And you don't have to look far. At least in our country, freedom apparently means being able to do whatever we want to do, regardless of the effect on others. Protests around the country have highlighted those

declaring that safer-at-home rules are a violation of their constitutional freedom to go where they want and do what they want, even if the exercise of their freedom increases the likelihood that they or others who come into contact with them will become confined by grave illness or simply the grave. We've witnessed church pastors declaring that banning physical worship services is a violation of their religious freedom. At this point I know of two of those pastors who have now died of the coronavirus; I haven't seen the reports on how many of their parishioners have joined them in their freedom.

It feels as if defining free as "able to do whatever I want" is problematic. Is the exercise of freedom that does harm others really freedom? That feels more like "domination." When I get to do what I want, even though that hurts others, is that freedom or privilege? And why does the exercise of this sort of freedom so often lead to harm and bondage even to the person who is supposedly being free? Freedom in the sense of "no one can tell me what to do" is often the first step toward addiction or teenage pregnancy or that automobile accident that you will regret for the rest of your life or the failed marriage. Doing what you want, followed by a lifetime of regret or guilt. This is freedom?

Maybe we should look at how the Bible defines it. We read from Paul's letter to the Galatians, chapter 5, verse 1 and then verses 13-23:

5 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ¹⁵If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

¹⁶ Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. ¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

Paul says, yes, we are called to freedom, but freedom is *not* doing whatever you want. He calls that "self-indulgence." Paul pictures it this way: we are pulled by two different levels of desire. First, there is the basic, fleshly level. This level of desire is normal, but in excess becomes lust, greed, and gluttony. Other desires of the flesh are power, control, fame, comfort, and victory over enemies. At this level, doing whatever we want leads to slavery to those desires. There is, however, in each of us, a different level of desire, which Paul calls the desires of the Spirit.

These are just as much a part of us as the others, but they lead a different direction. The desires of the Spirit are demonstrated, Paul says, when we willingly “become slaves to one another.” This level of desire leads to freedom, a freedom manifested by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. But this sounds like double-speak. What does freedom have to do self-control? How can freedom be found by choosing to be the slave of others? Does this make any sense at all?

I think it can, but let’s take another breath during this music.

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Today I want to suggest a completely different definition of freedom than the one we are used to. What if freedom is not the ability to do whatever we want but rather the freedom to become who we were meant to be? Jesus kept using the metaphor of seeds, so let me go there. You plant a seed, and there are things that might inhibit that seed from growing – lack of sun or water, bad soil, rabbits, invasive species – but if you protect that seed from those inhibiting factors, you set it *free* to grow. And it will grow into the plant that it was supposed to become, and it will bear the fruit it was supposed to bear. This is how the Bible understands human freedom, too. We were created to become the Image of God, people of kindness, mercy, compassion for the weak, courage, integrity, and generosity. Paul puts it even more simply: we were designed to “love our neighbors as ourselves.” Freedom is when we are able to grow toward that goal, shedding all those things that prevent us from becoming the Image of God, so that we bear the fruit we were designed to bear.

Doing whatever our fleshly desires prompt us to do is not freedom. As we said earlier – and Paul said 2000 years earlier than that – that’s a road to slavery. Freedom is being able to become who we really are. And notice one more thing about that kind of freedom: it never requires us to take away the freedom of others. Freedom to do whatever you want frequently means that someone else is going to have to stand aside or give up something they want. But my freedom to become my true self never limits someone else’s similar freedom. This sort of freedom is not a limited resource.

And so, back to our original question: why did God create people who were capable of such things as genocide? It’s not just that God created us with free will, although that’s one way to put it. At a deeper level, it’s that God created us for a purpose, to become creatures able to understand the depths of love and the freedom that comes from loving. But, as I put it in last week’s message, part of the wonder of God’s creation is that we have been invited to be a part of the creative process. We were not created to *be* the Image of God but to *become* the Image of God. We have been granted the right to turn down this invitation and to turn away from God. You can call that right “free will” if you want, but it has nothing to do with freedom. It is instead the insane decision to choose slavery over freedom – slavery to hatred and greed and selfishness, things that can never satisfy; slavery to fear and suspicion and anger. Evil is not just something that we have to put up if we want to have freewill – an unfortunate but unavoidable by-product – evil is the *opposite* of freedom. Christ has set us free, for freedom, Paul says. We were not designed to be slaves, even to ourselves. Freedom begins when we realize that.

Let us pray:

God, you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.
You have planted within us seeds of beauty,
 of mercy and compassion,
 of courage and integrity.
You have made us to love,
 to love the delights of this world, and to care for them,
 to love the creatures we share this world with, and to respect them,
 to love each other, and serve each other freely.
All this you instilled in us from our birth,
 and though we forget . . . often . . .
We remember when we read about doctors and nurses making their wills and then going
 to work anyway, and our eyes fill with tears,
We remember when we read about people turning their homes and businesses into
 assembly lines to sew masks to give away,
We see signs of your beauty around us in selfless service to others,
 and we remember who we were always supposed to become.
God, release us from all those things that are holding us back,
 that we may be your servants, free. Amen.