

Question and Response Time: Ask the Pastor!

August 29, 2010 – Browns Point UMC

Rev. Elizabeth Ingram Schindler

Questions are submitted by parishioners beforehand and are anonymous!

1. Why would God create something that will eventually bring disaster to humankind? For example, the sun will eventually be extinguished and that will mean the death of the humans living on earth. What is the purpose of God creating something that will cause pain and suffering?

In this specific instance, the scientific estimates I've read are that the sun will not be extinguished for 5 billion years. My hope is that Jesus will come back before then and the whole earth, including all of us, will be redeemed. So hopefully this isn't something we really have to worry about. Hopefully that doesn't sound like a cop-out answer!

But in a larger sense, asking about God creating things that will cause pain and suffering, I have to go back to the stories of creation in Genesis: after every day of creation, God said, "It is good." And after creating people, God said, "It is very good." And I believe that at creation, everything *was* good – at creation, I think the sun was endless and the seas stayed in their borders and people were not just good somewhere deep inside but *all* good. And then sin happened and we were separated from God by our disobedience. And directly, that doesn't explain things like the sun being extinguished, but it does explain the brokenness of all people and the mistakes we make which have effects on the earth and the stars and the air and all people. But if you keep reading further in Genesis, when God is punishing Adam and Eve, he says, "Cursed is the ground because of you." And then Cain killed Abel and his blood was taken into the ground. And many theologians argue that the curse of the ground is the brokenness of humanity extending to all creation. So that might give some theological explanation for the sun burning up – not that God created it knowing that it would cause pain and destruction, just like God didn't create us to hurt each other. But because sin entered the world, pain is a part of life. Of course, nothing in creation is beyond Christ's redemption, so we hope and believe that the world will be redeemed and everything will be restored to its original perfect state sooner rather than later.

2. If you were going to start practicing a spiritual discipline, what discipline(s) would you recommend for beginners? And then provide some examples of what practicing that discipline would look like for a beginner (how long, what exactly to do, etc.)

For a brand new Christian, my recommendation would be to read the New Testament. Read a little bit every day – maybe 5 or 10 minutes. Read it slowly and meditate on it (don't read it as quickly as you can so you can check it off your to-do list!). Ask two questions: what does this say about God? and what does this say about me/humankind? Write down your thoughts, and then at least once a week, discuss them with someone who you look up to in the faith. Learn who Jesus is, because that's who we're following. I think other disciplines will come more easily, more naturally, if someone starts with knowing the Christ revealed in the New Testament, particularly the gospels.

I'd follow this with a simple prayer rubric every day – again maybe 10 minutes – not too much. The specifics would depend on the person: depending on the person's interests or gifts, I might suggest writing, drawing, speaking, or moving prayers each day.

3. My question involves receiving a "call". People talk about God having a purpose for everyone or about receiving a call from God to perform a particular job or task. I have never received a call or at least have never recognized a call: what does this mean about my relationship with God?

First, I want to reiterate that "call," in this case meaning "vocation," is not just about career. And call does not always happen in dramatic fashion. So I do believe everyone has been called or is being called by God – but it may not be a "dream in the night to change your whole life" kind of call. God calls you to live in certain ways. God may call you to be a spouse or a parent, to advocate for those in need, to live your life in a certain way – God may not be telling you to do a particular job or take on a particular volunteer role at church. God's call on your life may be different: like "open your home in hospitality to a child or a parent or a friend." Or "speak up for situations of injustice," or "visit people who are lonely." Everyone is being called – quietly or dramatically, about huge life changes and the little things of every day.

Second, the dramatic nature of a call is not an indicator of holiness or discipleship, just like having a dramatic conversion story does not make you a better Christian than someone who has been a church-goer and a believer for as long as s/he can remember.

Last, God's call on your life sometimes comes as a voice or a vision or dream – and it often just comes as a feeling in your gut. Sometimes people tell you to "follow your heart." The call of God is like following your soul – something even deeper than heart. When I received my call to ministry, it wasn't a voice that rained down from heaven or a dream or even another person saying to me out loud, "You should be a pastor!" It was a feeling deep inside me that God was drawing me in closer and closer and asking more and more of me. And when I considered what that could mean --"Does it mean being in full-time ministry?" being only one possible answer -- I had a great peace in what had been a place of churning. Chances are that all of you have felt a churning, a yearning deep inside, and one answer among many possibilities has given you peace. That's probably God's call.

4. What do you think Jesus' main criticism would be of the modern Methodist church?

I can only speak about the United Methodist Church in America – there is a rapidly growing African Methodist Church and a sizeable Methodist Church in Europe, but in many ways they are different than the UMC in America, and my knowledge is limited to my experience here.

But my guess is that Jesus would be sad that UMC's in America seem to fall in one of two camps: either self-centered or judging. We are either outward focused and concerned about all the people or groups that we have decided are hell-bound (we're exclusive and judgmental – we may be reaching out, but only asking people to join our group and start looking and acting just like us) – stereotypically the southern church; or we're totally inward focused – people can be who they want, and they can join us or not join us, whatever. But it's up to them. We'll be here, and we'll be really nice if they show up, and we might even write

them a check if they need help in some way, or if we're really justice-oriented we might help them with our own two hands – but as for Good News, we'll keep it to ourselves.

Jesus asked his disciples to teach and heal and preach to every creature. We're called to be advocates for those in need – with our voices and our hands and not just our checkbooks (though also our checkbooks) –and we're called to strengthen our own faith through spiritual practice, worship, fellowship, etc. But we're also called by Jesus himself to tell others about the Good News, and we neglect even the easiest opportunities for this. I am guilty, as well. I think Jesus would be sad that we either don't believe in him enough to tell others about him, or we don't love our neighbors enough to share the Good News with them. This is why the American mainline church is in decline.

5. I know that being a disciple is not an easy task, but sometimes it seems much more than I can do. The early disciples left their nets and their homes to follow. Dietrich Bonhoeffer talks about the Gospel demanding your life and he left the safety of the United States to return to Germany to preach and work against Hitler, which resulted in his execution. If God wanted me to leave my family behind and travel to some distant place to do God's work, I would not be able to do it. Can I call myself a "Christian" when I know there are some things I just would not be able to do, even if I felt God was asking me to do them?

This is a great question – one that I've heard in other forms from others in the church, so I think it's something that's weighed on several people's hearts.

First, I want to say that I don't think God is necessarily asking people to give up their families. We often jump to that as a sign of faithfulness, but God often calls us *to* our families, and there's something distinctly holy about being a partner or a parent or sibling or son or daughter in an intentional way. God created us to be in relationship with each other. We were never meant to be alone. We are called to share our lives with others. Everyone is not called to leave their family to serve someone else.

My feeling on the larger question, though: "Can I call myself a Christian if I know there are some things I would not be able to do?" is yes! Absolutely. A Christian is not someone who has figured out the faith entirely and performs it perfectly every day. A Christian is someone who has dedicated his or her life to moving toward the example that Jesus offers.

And maybe it's cliché, but I don't believe God calls us to things for which God does not equip us. That's what I was trying to say talking about Jeremiah last week: God gives us everything we need to be faithful. So I don't think that it's necessary or even helpful to lay out a list of things that people have done in the name of faithfulness that we would or could do if asked. Because I don't think God will ask us to do things that God won't give us the courage and power and strength to do. They may still be difficult – I think absolutely it was difficult for Bonhoeffer to work against Hitler, for example. But I think God gave him what was necessary to be faithful.

I also want to warn us against idolizing the giants in the faith like Bonhoeffer – because everyone makes mistakes. No one has been perfectly faithful in this life. And it's entirely possible that while Bonhoeffer was working against Hitler, he was unfaithful to his family. I'm not cutting on Bonhoeffer because he's a giant in our tradition – but perhaps there were roads to faithfulness that he actually missed. There's no one right way to be a Christian. We're all unique, and our stories are unique, as well. Bonhoeffer was called to be Bonhoeffer. And you

are called to be you. You are not called to follow Bonhoeffer, though we can all learn from him. We are called to follow Jesus.

6. What do you believe that intercessory prayer for complete strangers actually "does"? Why do we do it? I understand that praying for yourself changes you and praying for people you know (and telling them) can make them feel comfort and support. But why pray for total strangers? Do we think that we are changing physical outcomes or events by doing it?

I think there are two possible answers to this question. The book of James says that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective, that if someone is sick you should bring them to the elders of the church and pray for them and they will be healed. And if you follow that understanding, then prayer actually can change outcomes and events. That is a totally reasonable thing to believe, even though it doesn't make logical scientific sense. I personally believe that prayer can change outcomes. I have witnessed events that are either outrageously coincidental or miracles as a result of prayer. I know prayer doesn't always result in miracles or change outcomes in the ways we think it should, and I cannot explain why. I do not believe that people die because they weren't prayed for – or that if I pray for healing for you and you do not get better it means my prayers haven't been good enough or I haven't been faithful enough. I have to chalk that up to one of the mysteries that will be explained in the hereafter but not until then. But I do believe that prayer has the power to change outcomes.

Maybe you don't believe that. And that's okay, because Jesus didn't say, "Believe that prayer can change outcomes." Jesus said, "You should pray in this way," and then he gave us the Lord's Prayer as a model. And if that's what you believe, then praying for total strangers is no different than praying for yourself. Prayer changes you – *especially* praying for others. It gets you outside of yourself. It helps you to remember that you are not the center of the world, that this church is not the center of Christendom. And it binds us together with other Christians around the world who are also praying for strangers, who might happen to be us. And the ultimate purpose of prayer, I think, is helping our hearts to look more and more like the heart of God – opening ourselves to the work of the Holy Spirit so God can transform us. So in that case, praying for anyone – known or unknown – has the same effect: it opens our hearts so that God can work on transforming us into the holy people we long to become.

7. How did we decide on this new worship schedule for Fall?

The worship team had a long discussion about what might be best for the church, then brought a proposal to the church council. The church council wasn't really thrilled with the proposal, and so amendments were made and longer discussion ensued until we came up with this proposal. We had consensus in the church council, so we moved forward. That's how it technically came about.

Some rationale: first, our average attendance since the first of July has been 89 with a high of 120. This is up almost 10% from our January-June attendance of this past year. If we look at the same period from last year, we're up about 12%. Then we look at trends over the years of attendance figures between summer and fall, and we can expect that if we follow those same trends – and I actually expect us to do better than the trends – then we should increase attendance by another 10% this fall, which would put us averaging about 100 in worship.

Studies show that if your sanctuary and/or parking lot are 80% full, then visitors are not likely to feel like there is room for them and they will not stay. I never see the whole parking lot when everyone's here because I'm inside, but my guess is that there aren't a lot of spaces, especially spaces near the door where a visitor might feel very welcome. And by my rough estimate, 80% full in the sanctuary is between 85 and 90 people. So we're already there. This is the rationale behind two services. We need more space if we want to grow.

Now why have two services that look almost exactly alike? Two reasons: first, we talked about our target demographic – the people in our neighborhood – what would be most helpful for them? What will make them feel most welcome? We haven't done all the research yet to see exactly who is in our neighborhood, but our hunch is that we're not reaching out to a whole new demographic, that our neighborhood demographics look a lot like our congregation: variety of ages, lots of families, some older folks. Very few young singles or college-age folks. So we didn't feel like we needed to invent something new to reach the neighborhood.

So then we ask the question, "What is missing from the one service we have now that we might implement in a second service?" And we couldn't come up with anything. No one represented on worship team or church council said, "We need a contemporary praise team" or "please let's start doing Taize worship every Sunday" or "Let's put PowerPoint slides on a screen." And we didn't want to launch into something new if there was no demand for it.

So then we talked about times, and it seemed like this community would be more interested in earlier services than late- people didn't want to be at church past lunch time. I didn't want to come to church for a service earlier than 8:30, if possible! We didn't want to challenge families to get their kids here before 9:30 or 10:00 nor to keep them here past lunch time, when smaller kids start melting down and needing naps. So 8:30 and 10:00 made sense with Sunday school at the second service.

And as for communion every week, this is an experiment. As the protestant church has gotten further and further from our roots as sacramental, liturgical people, there's more demand for tradition among people of all ages. I believe the sacrament is incredibly powerful: a place of healing for body and relationship, a place of inclusion, commitment, renewal, discipleship – truly a "means of grace" as John Wesley said. So why not offer it as often as possible?

I know people have really enjoyed "seeing everybody" this summer with only one service. And it's tough to know everybody in the whole church if we don't all gather as one big group every week. But with a sanctuary as small as ours, that's not going to be possible! And if we truly want to grow, we'll have to accept that at some point, we can't be intimate friends with everyone in the congregation.

So we'll try it. We'll see how it goes. There's a chance that one service will be too small to survive or to make visitors feel welcome and included. My prayer is that that won't happen, that we'll have more than enough folks for two services to feel full of life and energy.