

[BLANK] [PRAYER] Thank you for coming today. I don't ever take it for granted, and I hope that you don't, either. As I said in our peace-making workshop last week, peace is a choice, not a fact, and we could say the same way that faith is a choice, not a fact. Thank you for choosing faith today, even if your faith is not sure. Faith is a beautiful choice, no matter what. I am especially grateful for you being here on World Communion Sunday, when we help to celebrate the rebirth of Christianity all over this earth, in the hearts of people who are being led fearlessly by amazing new Christian leaders.

I am also grateful that, like those new Christians and their leaders, you come here to seek out joy in the face of adversity, hope in the face of darkness, love in the face of hurt and challenges. It's not all smooth sailing out there, is it? As beautiful as God's creation is, as wonderful as our love of God can be, life can be baffling, and we can go looking for answers to tough questions that life brings us. Our skin is only half a millimeter thick, after all. We are delicate beings. Put us on the surface of Mars, and we'd barely last a minute. Leave plants without food and water for a few days, and they muddle through it, well enough. Do the same with us, and we usually don't do as well.

Why? Why is it so easy for us to suffer? Why are there great tidal waves that kill hundreds of thousands of people, and spare others? Why do we lose loved ones to illness, or accidents, or war, or terrorism, when others live? Why are innocent people persecuted all over this earth, and even in our homes? And, perhaps most important for people seeking answers, why does an all-powerful God who loves us allow such suffering to happen? Why? Why?

We have a right, and a responsibility, as people of faith, to ask these questions. We promise people hope, love, joy, and peace from a life of faith, and we want to be true to our promises. We want to be responsible people who don't lie about what it is that God does, and what God wants. We don't want our hearts, or anyone else's hearts, to turn bitter, without hope from God, because we promised them false hopes from faith. And if we are to be true to our God and our faith, we must be willing to answer life's toughest questions of "Why" - not just once, but again, and again, because life will always offer us new questions, with answers that can challenge us as humble creations of God.

This and my next three sermons will focus on how God helps us to look at the big questions that people bring to God. Many people struggle with bringing life's tough questions to God. Some of us may have grown up with ideas about who and what God is that can keep us from wanting to ask such questions. Maybe we were told something hurtful about what God wanted to do to us, because of what we had done, or because of what someone had done to us. Maybe no one ever really gave us a deep sense that God was really there to listen to us. If you have those hesitations, those doubts, those moments of bitterness and doubt, don't worry. You're not alone. We know this, because the Bible tells us so. And the Bible tells us how we can overcome our hesitations and doubts.

In the Hebrew Bible, we meet a man named Job. Job was a prosperous man. Job was a faithful man. Job loved God deeply. People looked at Job, and they said to themselves, "Look at how God loves Job! He has wealth, health, a wonderful family - God rewards Job!" And the angels in heaven, and even some angels below heaven, saw this too. Some of the angels who visited earth approached God one day, and said to God, "Job loves you so very much, God, doesn't he? [ASHES] But would Job still love you if you took all of those things away, and he suffered everything bad, instead of enjoying everything good?"

God did not want Job to suffer. God loved Job. But those angels who had been walking around the earth saw how fragile people are. They knew how easy it is for us to mistake our good fortune for God's love, and our bad fortune for God's hate. Was Job just another one of these people? Would Job turn away from God if he were to suffer the loss of everything good in his life? Was Job's love for God really free, and unconditional, or did Job's love for God depend on how life treated Job? [BLANK]

This is a tough question, one that makes us ask ourselves: does God really not want us to suffer? In the book that we're reading now in our faith groups, Adam Hamilton writes about how, when he was younger, he thought that the Bible was a story about how people who loved God would not suffer. But as his faith matured, he began to realize that this was really not the story of the Bible. Instead, he began to realize that, in many ways, the Bible is a story about people who refused to let go of their faith, in spite of their innocent suffering. I think that Adam Hamilton makes a good point. Maybe our assumptions about how God owes us answers for suffering are misplaced. Maybe what we need to do is to look more deeply at the answers that we expect from God.

Is suffering ever God's will for us? Is suffering in this life ever God's punishment? Is what we, or other people, have to endure, something that God has set against us, because of our sins? On the surface, these are the questions that we want God to answer. But hidden behind these questions lies a deeper question that we want answered: If we suffer, how can we trust that God really loves us? We want to love God. But, as fragile people in God's creation, with skin as thin as tissue, and hearts that break, what we want to ask God is: do you really love me?

The story of Job gives us powerful answers to this deeper question. One thing that you'll notice as you read it is that God never denies God's love for Job, and God never says that God wants to punish Job. God admired how Job holds on to his integrity. God admired Job's love for God. But God knew that the worldly angels were asking if Job had the integrity to love God no matter what, the way that God loved Job, no matter what. Could Job choose love in the middle of everything bad that life could offer?

And God knew the answer to that question. There is no real love unless we choose to love. And there is no real choice to love unless we have chosen to love in spite of everything that could make us not want to love. So what the angels were asking God is: could Job, in spite of his human weakness, choose to love God the way that God loved

Job? Did Job really have faith in God's love?

Let's see how Job answers our questions over the next few weeks. But as Christians, God has answered this question. Can a human, weak, and prone to suffer by our very nature, have the power to love God, as God loves us, no matter what? Our answer as Christians to this question is simple: through faith in Jesus Christ, yes, it is possible. Through faith in the God who suffered innocently as us, with us, and for us, we know that God wants to help us to love the way that God loves. Why do pure people suffer? Because God knows, through Jesus, that even God, with the purest power and love, must suffer on this earth, if pure love is really to be pure love.

We know how hard this can be. Through our own suffering, through the suffering of loved ones, through the suffering that we see in God's world, we know that to love in the face of suffering can be the hardest thing of all to do as a human being. And we are right to think and feel that suffering is hard. Because, without thinking and feeling this, we lose our ability to love, and to choose love, love that gives us our fundamental integrity as creations of the God, who loved us enough to make us, to suffer as one of us, to die for us, and to offer us new life, now and forever.

[CHURCH] On this World Communion Sunday, we can be thankful for this love born of faith that we share with Christians around the world. Many of them are growing the world's faith in Christ in the face of unthinkable suffering. Christians in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, China, India, Russia, Africa, and many more places, being persecuted simply because they have the integrity to love our God in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, are growing the faith of the world, as in ages past. These are people whose love for God in Jesus provide them with the integrity of Job, born not of an easy life, a life of good fortune, but a faith born from the bedrock strength and integrity of true, deep, and abiding Christian faith.

[BLANK] Why do people suffer? Because we are God's creations, who, through faith in Jesus Christ, can choose to love as God loves, in Christ, no matter what. The love of God that comes to us, through faith in Jesus Christ, can lead us into the full integrity of God's love, so that we can continue to answer this question, and all questions, with the hope of Christian love as our salvation, no matter what. Amen.