

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017  
20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
Choose: Information or In Formation?  
Rev. John Crow

Isaiah 45:1-7  
Psalm 96:1-9  
1 Thessalonians 1:1-10  
Matthew 22:15-22

On the evening of October 1<sup>st</sup>, Stephen Paddock shot people he didn't know from a 32<sup>nd</sup> story window of the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino in Las Vegas. Not including himself, fifty-eight people died that night, and hundreds were wounded. You may have noticed since that time a desperate search by investigators to learn *why he did it*. Unlike most mass-shooters, this man left no manifesto in a notebook, nor rant on social media. There appear to be no links to terrorist or hate groups. He doesn't match the profile of the kind of person who normally commits such horrific crimes. Everyone wants to know *why*—even though we know the who, what, when, and where. It's the *why* that haunts us. That's because we are meaning-seeking creatures. We don't like randomness or chaos. Surprisingly, this is no different for atheists who state that the universe just is, and there is no meaning behind it or our existence. So why the concern with the

why? Simply put, we prefer knowledge over change and empowerment over growth. In other words, we want information over being in formation.

In our search for information, we tend to ask the wrong questions, and we do so for the wrong reasons. I'm sorry to break it to you, but your teachers lied to you: there is such a thing as a bad question. *Why doesn't God instantly deliver me from this temptation?* That's a good example of a bad question. Would it not be better for everyone if we were to stop sinning right now? Doesn't God have the power to do it? If you are reading Peter Kreeft's How to be Holy, then this bad question might sound familiar to you. (So will my response.) Becoming "saints without suffering" is "self-contradictory" (41). God can do anything that is possible, but God can only act where there is a possible act to take. In his book, Can God Be Trusted, Professor John Stackhouse, Jr. wrote in regards to becoming holy, "it may be that there aren't any shortcuts to take" (91). I think the bigger issue isn't whether or not God can make us instant saints, but rather why it is better that He not do so. One answer might be that God is more concerned with our direction than our location. Are we growing more like Christ, or less? God doesn't mind that we are all in-progress, so neither should we.

The bad question that Jesus was asked in our gospel reading today was intended as a trap. “Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar?” Whether Jesus answered *yes* or *no*, they had Him, and He knew it. He responded with what I call “the Jesus Maneuver”---side-stepping the question in order to point out a higher truth.

According to R.T. France, in this situation, Jesus wanted his hearers to see that the secular finds its proper role within the greater authority of the sacred (Matthew, 3:16). Jesus thus demonstrated that just because we are capable of forming a particular question, doesn’t mean that question has a valid answer, or a helpful one.

This brings me to the granddaddy of all bad questions: *Why do bad things happen to good people?* Or as it is usually asked, *Why is God allowing this to happen to me?* This gets to the heart of what theologians call “the problem of evil.” How can an all-powerful, all-knowing God be good, and yet allow evil to exist? Are you ready for the answer? How long have you got? An in-depth, fully-orbed answer to this single question would easily fill an entire semester-long seminary class, so we’re not going to attempt that here. Some have even rejected orthodox Christianity because they were unable to find a satisfactory answer to this question—so this is *really* important.

What I will do, however, is try to show you why this is a bad question, and hopefully pull off a successful “Jesus Maneuver” of my own, pointing us in a new direction by nudging our thinking into a higher plane.

First, the very question of why sin and suffering exist in the world begs the question of why would we expect it to be otherwise? Why do we think there should be a sin-free, pain-free existence? The answer is simply because we believe in God but at the same time, we don’t understand Him or what He is doing. I think it’s fascinating that the Bible starts off by addressing the question of whence comes evil, right in the first three chapters of Genesis. Before we knew this was a theological problem, God knew it would be, so rather than hiding from it, He tackles it head-on. And I can’t help but think we have this built-in expectation of a life without sin and evil because we were not created for this. Mankind was created for the Garden, not Armageddon.

Another way of looking at the question of sin and suffering’s existence is *Who deserves otherwise?* Are we not living in the world we deserve? You can’t ask why bad things happen to good people if there are no truly good people to begin

with. I know, this is a little depressing. Few people enjoy standing on a scale and seeing the objective truth of how much they weigh, but even fewer want to be weighed on God's scale of perfect obedience. Any volunteers? We are all painfully aware of our falling short.

Lastly, asking the question of why sin and suffering exist risks making the same mistake as Job. You may recall that after all his suffering, Job finally questions God, as any of us would surely do. Does God give a detailed theological answer to Job's yearning for understanding? No—Not at all. God's answer is essentially, *I'm God and you're not*. It's the divine version of "because I said so." Coming from anyone else, this answer would be completely unsatisfying. In Job chapter 42, he comes to his senses and admits that he can't possibly understand all that God is doing.

We should learn from Job's folly. It is good and healthy to investigate the question of how sin and suffering can exist, but it easily crosses the bounds of moving into pride. Professor Stackhouse, Jr. also wrote, "It is one thing to grieve over one's own unhappiness; it is quite another thing to go on to pronounce judgment on God's administration of the world" (109).

So if when given the opportunity to lay it all out for us, God instead chooses to keep His activity hidden in mystery, where does that leave us? To put it simply: It leaves us in a better place. Rather than having us rely on information, God directs us towards being in formation. We prefer information. Information is empowering. Information is immediate. Information supports independence. But the truth is, you can't **know** your way into heaven. Spiritual formation reminds us of who we are in relation to God. Formation is humbling. Formation is a slow process. Formation builds trust and reliance upon God. Formation is a matter of the heart: We must be spiritually formed into loving completely.

Let's now unpack what it is to be in formation, and what results from it. Being in formation focuses on what God has revealed to us about His nature, rather than on knowing the reasons for His actions. This results in true joy and complete trust. Spiritual formation is the life-long process of growing in Christlikeness, and is essentially the reason we exist, according to Peter Kreeft <sup>(17)</sup>. Like Michelangelo chipping away at a block of marble to reveal the David, formation slowly removes what isn't good, makes our rough places smooth, and reveals the true beauty that God put inside each and every one of us. Spiritual formation is

also a story—God’s and ours’—of how all things are being redeemed. It isn’t a formula or a hypothesis. It’s a narrative—a story. And that is how God has revealed himself to us—in narrative—which is the only way to reveal deep mysteries to an audience who can’t be expected to fully understand them.

When we delve down to the core of what God has revealed about Himself, it’s the Greeks who gave us the neat philosophical syllogisms of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. Yes, it is true, and in fact, essential, that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-present, but that isn’t how Yahweh made Himself known to Mankind. He revealed Himself through the narrative of His mighty acts. He was known as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The only philosophical revelation I can think of God making about Himself was when He told Moses at the burning bush that He was to be known as “I AM” (Exodus 3:14); by which He meant that God is self-existing. God was not created, nor is He made of matter. Also, one can draw from that that if God was not created, then He always existed. But I digress. It is helpful to know the perfection and limitlessness of God in philosophical terms, but that isn’t how He primarily revealed Himself, nor is it how we are being formed to be more like Him.

Before I get to how formation based on God's attributes leads to true joy and complete trust, there are three other essential attributes I want to discuss briefly. Beyond the "alls" of all-knowing, all-power, and all-present, God is eternal. You could consider this a sub-category of being all-present. Not only is He present in all places simultaneously, but also in all times. There is no past, present, or future apart from God. Second, God is all-loving. Peter Kreeft writes about this in detail, explaining how even if God were all-powerful and all-knowing, it wouldn't do us much good if He didn't love us! I also want to highlight a sub-category of being all-loving, and that is being all-suffering. God suffers with us and for us. Because He loves us perfectly, our suffering is shared by God. What? How can the all-powerful creator and king of the universe suffer anything? This is where I would like to tell the Greek philosophers to put that in your theological pipe and smoke it! Honestly, I have no idea how this is true, but it is. Third, God is all-moral, or as we like to call it, holy. God's plan of redemption makes no sense without His holiness. It's God's holiness that requires punishment for sin. God cannot overlook sin, forget sin, or fail to punish sin. God hates sin. It's the only thing He hates. And He hates it in part, because of what it does to us, whom He loves.

Now it's finally all going to come together as we look at how focusing on God's revealed attributes forms us into joyful, trusting creatures. But first, some thoughts about what joy is and isn't. Joy does not change our circumstances, but rather results from a change in how we view our circumstances. Joy can seem very illogical. Just look at verse six of our epistle reading today in 1 Thessalonians, chapter one. The Thessalonian church was commended for having joy despite suffering. How can that be? How does one have joy despite suffering? Their joy resulted from living in the light of the Truth. Their joy was actually very logical.

Knowing that their God is all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present, and all-loving in all times, they had nothing to fear, because despite the fact that they didn't have all the answers, they knew that God loved them, knew what was best for them, and had the power to bring it about. We too, should see our own circumstances from this viewpoint. If all that we believe about God is true, then in some mysterious way, even our suffering must produce good results. If you doubt that, just read Romans 8:28. The truth that God is working out all things for the good of them that love Him may not *feel* true at any given moment, but we need to remember that God is about the process, and He has all the time in the world.

Not only does living in the Truth bring us joy, but it is also a gift of the Holy Spirit. (Refer back to 1 Thessalonians 1:6.) We could live obedient lives, growing in Christlikeness, without feeling joy. But the Holy Spirit wants us to have joy—so He offers it to us. Here is a word for any of you who are so intellectual that you think emotions are for lesser mortals: Knock it off. If you really believe in the God I've described above, then the only way you wouldn't feel joy is if you forgot to let the Truth past your brain. Joy is a gift of the Holy Spirit, so accept it. And don't think you can or should "work it up," like joy is some emotional state that we can force. That would be exhausting. We can pray for joy, and through faith in our loving God, the Holy Spirit will give it to us.

Then there is trust: something our society is so sorely lacking in all areas of life. I have another definition for trust: forward-looking joy. Does one normally experience joy over some wonderful thing that is still a long way off? No, we have trust that it will come to pass, so I'm using *trust* in the sense that it is chronologically separated from joy just like the future is separated from the present. I said earlier that focusing on God's revealed attributes forms us into trusting creatures. Because God is timeless and changeless, His promises are just as good today as they were the day they were made. Our reading today in Psalm

96 tells us that God is bringing justice to the world, and that we should rejoice as a result. Because He is holy, God's justice means that all things will be made right. No longer will the evil triumph. All things will be made right—including us. The war within ourselves will cease.

So we can trust that evil has been put on notice. It cheers my heart to read the words by John Stackhouse, Jr., "evil is fundamentally anomalous and temporary" (94). Even though in many ways our existence is defined by evil, and it may feel like it's all we know, in the big picture, evil is an anomaly. It's an outlier. It won't last. The almighty God is bringing evil to an end, just as He promised.

So ultimately, my best answer to the question of how sin and suffering can exist in a universe created by a holy and loving God who is without limits to His power, knowledge, and strength, is that we stop struggling for the answer, and instead rest in trust. This is what Job eventually did, and since God cares more about us being in formation than He does about giving information, this is really our only choice. We will never in this life receive all the answers we seek to all our bad questions. God is purposely withholding that information. Could it be that doing

so is in our best interest? Could it be that in accepting the mystery, we take a step in being spiritually formed through faith and trust in God?

As we prepare to receive the Eucharist, it should remind us that beyond any doubt, in sacrificing His own Son, God proved for all time that He is trustworthy. And that, friends, is a truly good answer to any bad question.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.