

Romans 8:26-39 (NRSV)

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes^q with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God,^r who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit^s intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.^t

²⁸ We know that all things work together for good^u for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family.^v ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

God's Love in Christ Jesus

³¹ What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.^w ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹

^q Other ancient authorities add *for us*

^r Gk *the one*

^s Gk *he* or *it*

^t Gk *according to God*

^u Other ancient authorities read *God makes all things work together for good, or in all things God works for good*

^v Gk *among many brothers*

^w Or *Is it Christ Jesus . . . for us?*

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Title

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: Romans 8:26-39

On a stormy night in 1983 William Sloane Coffin's son Alex accidentally crashed his car through a metal barrier and into the Fort Point Channel in Boston. That suddenly Coffin's twenty-four year-old son lost his life. In the blink of an eye. A slight mis-perception. A momentary turn of the wheel. A life extinguished. As every parent who has lost a child will tell you, it is a gut-wrenching, heart-breaking agony to face the death of one's child.

Ten days later William Sloane Coffin preached at Riverside Church in New York. The sermon remains quite famous, and for no reason more than a story he told near the beginning. In his words:

When a person dies, there are many things that can be said, and there is at least one thing that should never be said. The night after Alex died I was sitting in the living room of my sister's house outside of Boston, when the front door opened and in came a nice-looking, middle-aged woman, carrying about eighteen quiches. When she saw me, she shook her head, then headed for the kitchen, saying sadly over her shoulder, "I just don't understand the will of God." Instantly I was up and in hot pursuit, swarming all over her. "I'll say you don't, lady!" I said.

Since the day Coffin preached this sermon, the story has been told and retold by countless ministers and other believers. They like the fact that it sets the record straight. Don't blame bad things that happen to good people on the will of God.

I recall this story well. I was ordained the very year of the accident. In fact the day I was ordained a man in his early thirties in our congregation died of a cerebral hemorrhage. The hands that ordained me had hardly been removed from my head when I was called upon to console a grief-stricken family in a very like circumstance.

But I have to be honest with you. I have always hated that story. I can imagine and forgive a grief-filled father striking out in anger at any ready target. That Coffin was angry at the woman is understandable in the situation. But when Coffin mounted the pulpit in Riverside Church, in a black clerical robe with a stole, the yoke of Christ, over his shoulders, he was a more than a grieving father; he was a minister. I have always hated that story as a story of ministry.

I suppose the most obvious reason for my distaste for the story is its utter lack of pastoral sensitivity. A woman, a human being befuddled as we all are at times by the workings of the world, was doing all she knew to do. She baked in her kitchen and brought food to the grieving, as neighbors have done for generations. An act of hospitality of Biblical proportions. And she struggled for words of consolation in the midst of an unexplainable event and an inconsolable

moment. How hard and faithful it is to even show up at these times when there seem no right words to help. How courageous to show up and try. This woman showed up. And the famous preacher took her head off. As I said, in itself that is understandable if unwarranted. But turned into an act of supposed righteousness in one of the most important pulpits in the country is inexcusable and arrogance beyond measure. Coffin purported in that sermon to speak of the love of God, but he missed how much that love appeared in the love of his neighbor.

There is another reason, too, why I hate the story. At least as important, the woman was posing a theological question with which probably every one of us has struggled. Why do these things happen? With honesty and a measure of frustration she confessed, "I just don't understand the will of God." Is there anyone here who has not struggled to understand the will of God.

In his sermon Coffin went to great length to say that neither his son's death, nor the other horrible things that happen in life, are God's will. He took the position that Rabbi Kushner and so many other theologians have taken in the last thirty years. When perplexed about why bad things happen to good people, they have given up their belief in an all-powerful God in order to save their belief in a compassionate one. Coffin said, "When the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break." He went on to say that God offers us "minimum protection and maximum support."

First of all, I want to say that I agree with some part of Coffin's sentiment. I do believe that God weeps with us in our times of sorrow and despair. Many times in funeral services I have borrowed that image from Fred Buechner where he points to the cross and says that God knows how we feel. When we find Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane praying that he not have to drink the cup, when we hear him cry out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," we encounter a God who understands and grieves for our pain. God does weep for us.

I find this very comforting, and I hope you do, too. But is that all there is to it? Are things reduced to the dilemma that the Book of Job proposes: if bad things happen to good people, God must either not care or be powerless. That is, are we inevitably left with a choice between a loving God and a powerful God? Many, like Coffin, have come to just this conclusion. And I suppose of the two choices a loving God is the better one.

On the other hand, much of scripture, including this morning's reading from Romans to puts in a pitch for God's power and makes a case for some meaningful sense to the universe. In other words, the thought that things happen by God's will isn't as ridiculous as Coffin wanted to make it sound. The question that plagued his neighbor who brought the quiches to his grieving family has some ground. She has some Biblical ground to say that she can't imagine why God would will such a senseless death.

Romans says, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose." The woman was saying, essentially, if this is true, I don't understand it. If things work together for the good, how can I explain this grievous death? Coffin elects to say that God doesn't make things happen for the good. Others, however, have said God works for the good, but they have had a difficult job of explaining things.

Some have said, yes, it's true; if you are right with God, things will go your way, and conversely, if things are going badly, you are not right with God. As you may imagine, these people make poor chaplains. And they tend to be young and inexperienced. For as the old African American spiritual says, the sky may have no clouds today, but the storms clouds will

gather one day. No one I know escapes suffering entirely. It takes both arrogance and inexperience to believe that if you're right with God, your life will be a life of easy bliss.

Others have said, yes, things will work together for the good, not now, but ultimately. Sometimes they mean that in the afterlife, everything will be set aright. The story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke says something like that. Lazarus had it bad when he was alive, but in the afterlife, he has the life of luxury, while the rich man found himself parched in the flames. I am hoping that things may be good in the afterlife, but I'm in no special hurry to find out. And even if the afterlife is wonderful, we are told in Genesis that God created this life, this earth, this creation as good.

When others say that God always work for the good, they mean that though we may not understand why things happen the way they do, though we may not get it in the moment, God has a plan. They say, God's will is mysterious, but it is not random. There's a good reason that God has taken your son just now. I have met quite a few people who even as grownups have been furious with God, because as children they were told that God needed mommy more than they did. I don't find the idea that God has a plan to be very comforting. Like Coffin, were I facing the death of my son, I would be pretty appalled at the heartlessness of God's planning.

So far this morning we have found problems with quite a few venerable theological explanations for the pain we experience in the world. The belief that, in fact, we always get what we deserve is at the very least naive. The idea that though we may not understand it, everything is really God's plan isn't helpful, and may be mean-spirited. Promises for the afterlife don't help us make meaning out of our living in this world we have been given. And Coffin's answer that God really loves us but is simply powerless to affect the world, while giving us a kind-hearted God, gives us little to hang our hope onto.

As I said, this is the same conundrum that faced Job. Job wanted to take God to court. Job said, I've been good. You are supposed to both powerful and just. You have no right to make me suffer so. After thirty-seven chapters, God finally answers Job. And you know what God said? God said, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" In other words, God told Job, you do not fathom the deep mysteries of creation. You do not understand.

Was God, then telling Job, Job, it is a mystery, but I have a plan? Was God saying, It's just that you don't know the plan? Well, God is certainly saying that Job doesn't understand how the universe works, but God mentions nothing about a plan.

Okay, it's time to try to give an answer. Why do bad things happen to good people? The answer is, I really don't know. But I do have some ideas about the related questions. Probably all of us have heard about the idea of free will, the idea that God allows us to have freedom, and therefore God doesn't control everything. I have to confess to you that during much of my life I have found this particular assertion to be a cop out. I've thought of people who offered it as the cure-all answer to be like Pontius Pilate, washing their hands of messy business. But over time I have come to believe that if we were but actors in a play, if God simply gave us a script, and everything that happens is just reading the lines, that life would have little if any meaning at all. Like Job, I wasn't there when God mapped out creation, but I have become convinced that God built choice and other possibilities into the design. And the price of that, is that is a mixture of good and bad, sometimes because of choices we ourselves make, and sometimes for reasons we cannot fathom. I don't know the details, but I do know that once God said it's not going to be a script, possible combinations are like the sand of the sea.

But I also believe that God does retain not only great, enormous love for us, but also the ability to nudge things. Jesus is a good example. Jesus, God incarnated, came to show us the right way to live, and maybe even to unmask our own predilection to crucify the good. God nudged us, but God didn't take over control.

I do think, though, that God is always nudging things, and God is always trying, in the words my mother used, to turn a sow's ear into a silk purse. In this I would agree with Coffin. God did not will that Alex drive his car into the water. But I do believe that God is always trying to make the best out of things that happen, including our greatest suffering. In the novel *Gilead*, the Rev. John Ames went to Kansas to work against slavery. He fought in the Civil War, and by the time he came home, he had but one eye and other injuries. Reverend Ames always said of that affliction, and any other that happened to him, "There must be a blessing in this somewhere."

I take this to be a subtle but important point. It was not that God willed affliction so that the affliction would lead to blessing. It was that when the affliction came, as inevitably it would, God would keep nudging things so that a blessing might come out of it, nonetheless.

Over these years I have thought many times of William Sloane Coffin's story, and I have thought many times about the woman whose feelings and theology he was so careless with. I have often wished that when he had jumped and followed her, he hadn't berated her for her theological conundrum. And I have wished that he had not glorified that embarrassing moment to the congregation at Riverside Church. I have wished that, instead, he would have said, "I think God's will is a very complicated thing. I don't believe that God took the wheel and drove Alex into the water. But I do believe, though in my grief I cannot imagine it yet, that God will nudge even this event into some form of blessing." When Buechner points to the cross, he doesn't just say, "There's a symbol that shows us that God knows our suffering." He points to it and says that it is also a symbol that God overcomes our suffering. God certainly weeps for us. But God also nudges things toward blessing.

In Paul's words, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Amen.