**Turning Hurt to Joy** John 16:16-24, 33

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Slides** | **Sermon** |
| 1 | Title Slide |
| 2 | “The moment we say no the world and yes to God, all our problems are solved, all our questions answered, all our troubles over. Nothing can disturb the tranquility of the soul at peace with God. Nothing can interfere with the blessed assurance that all is well between me and my Savior. Nothing and no one can upset the enjoyable relationship that has been established by faith in Jesus Christ. We Christians are among the privileged company of persons who don’t have accidents, who don’t have arguments with our spouses, who aren’t misunderstood by our peers, whose children do not disobey us.  If any of those things should happen – a crushing doubt, a squall of anger, a desperate loneliness, an accident that puts us in the hospital, an argument that puts us in the doghouse, a rebellion that puts us on the defensive, a misunderstanding that puts us in the wrong – it is a sign that something is wrong with our relationship with God. We have, consciously or unconsciously, retracted our yes to God; and God, impatient with our fickle faith, has gone off to take care of someone more deserving of his attention. |
| 3 | Is that what you believe? *(Is that what you think Christians believe? –My addition).* If it is, I have some incredibly good news for you. You are wrong.” *(Eugene Peterson, A Long Obedience in the Same Direction, p. 37).*  [Those words come from Eugene Peterson’s book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*.} They express a truth that I have encountered again and again in my ministry. We have a real problem in The Church. There is a subtle yet sinister teaching in our midst. I’m not sure we United Methodists would actually articulate this teaching out loud, though some traditions do. Still, even we, with all our progressive thinking, somehow manage to convey this error, to perpetuate this heresy and thus we practically ensure that those raised in our midst will, at some point in their lives, encounter a major faith crisis. And this is the teaching: *God takes care of good little boys and girls*. |
| 4 | Now, like most heresies, there is just enough truth here to really make this teaching dangerous. God does take care of his people – always. But that does not mean that bad things do not happen. That does not mean that Christians are immune from any of the struggles, pains, hurts of life. That does not mean that cancer will not strike, jobs will not be lost, loved ones will not die suddenly or too soon. **That is not how God promises to take care of us**. Faithful prayers are ***not*** magic wands or magic words said over a person that force God to do what we want him to do. When we plant this teaching deep within our people, and bad things do happen in their lives – and they will – they have only one of two (2) choices. |
| 5 | 1. God is not faithful enough or I am not good enough.   It’s a sinister teaching, friends, wrapped up in good intentions.  Wade’s death – This has happened for a reason. …. God has something really important that He wants to teach you through this. …. God needs another angel in heaven!  My responses to most of these comments were a polite smile and nod at best or a simple total ignoring of the comment and I’m afraid, sometimes, of the person as well. All the time thinking to myself, am I so dumb and hard-headed that God would take my son’s life to teach me something? Has God no scruples that He would commit murder to make a point to me? What reason could be so important that He would snuff out the life of one of his children (without that child’s consent or without his volunteering or without his collaboration) to participate in this “teaching moment”. Was God trying to teach me that I am not faithful enough? News flash! I already know this is true. So, I am left with the other alternative. God is not faithful! But, the Bible, the church, my experience and my reason says this isn’t true either! I have seen God’s faithfulness so many times in my life. |
| 6 | I received an email, one that I received many times over the years. It goes like this:  This is one of the best explanations of why God allows pain and  >>>> suffering that I have seen…  A man went to a barber shop to have his hair cut and his beard trimmed.  >>>> As the barber began to work, they began to have a good conversation.  >>>> They talked about so many things and various subjects.  >>>> When they eventually touched on the subject of God, the barber said:  >>>> ”I don’t believe that God exists.”  >>>> ”Why do you say that?” asked the customer. “Well, you just have to  >>>> go out in the street to realize that God doesn’t exist.  >>>> Tell me, if God exists, would there be so many sick people?  >>>> Would there be abandoned children?  >>>> If God existed, there would be neither suffering nor pain.  >>>>I can’t imagine a loving God who would allow all of these things.”  >>>> The customer thought for a moment, but didn’t respond because he  >>>> didn’t want to start an argument.  >>>> The barber finished his job and the customer left the shop.  >>>> Just after he left the barbershop, he saw a man in the street with  >>>> long, stringy, dirty hair and an untrimmed beard.  >>>> He looked dirty and unkempt. The customer turned back and entered  >>>> the barber shop again and he said to the barber:  >>>> ”You know what? Barbers do not exist.”  >>>> ”How can you say that?” asked the surprised barber.  >>>> ”I am here, and I am a barber. And I just worked on you!”  >>>> ”No!” the customer exclaimed. “Barbers don’t exist because  >>>> if they did, there would be no people with dirty long hair and  >>>> untrimmed beards, like that man outside.”  >>>> ”Ah, but barbers DO exist” That’s what happens when people do not  >>>> come to me.”  >>>> ”Exactly!” affirmed the customer. “That’s the point! God, too, DOES exist!  >>>> That’s what happens when people do not go to Him and don’t look to  >>>> Him for help.  >>>> That’s why there’s so much pain and suffering in the world.” |
| 7 | And once again, a Christian offers to the hurting a heresy disguised as hope – be good enough, pray hard enough, witness boldly enough, come to God, go to church and God won’t let bad things happen to you.  Don’t you see? Despite good intentions, such responses leave us only two choices. God was not faithful enough or I was not good enough.  We have suffering because we don’t let God work on us, i.e. the barber story or because we try to do right but just can’t. God is not so loving or we are not faithful.  But, this I do know, neither of those choices was the right choice. In the midst of our hurting, heresies are no help at all.  But we as Christians do have something to offer. Something that will help. We have the assurance that *God puts the fallen back on their feet*. (Psalm 147:6). God really can turn hurt into hope, even the hurt of suffering. |
| 8 | **BIBLE TEACHING**  Now, I have to say that I have no clue as to how this teaching – about God protecting his people from pain and hurt – has developed among believers. I can’t find anything at all to support this in the Bible. Bad things were always happening to those who served God. Think about what it meant to be the **Chosen People** of God for the Old Testament Israelites. They were **enslaved**, **wandered in the desert**, **were hated and despised**, fought **battle after battle**, were **taken into exile**, and **occupied by foreign nations**. One of the great lines from *Fiddler on the Roof* is when the faithful Jewish Patriarch looks up at the sky and says … *I know. I know. We are Your chosen people. But, once in a while, can You choose someone else?* The children of Israel were in **no way immune to the struggles of life**. And the same was **true for early Christians**. They were forced to **live in catacombs**, were used for **cruel and deadly sport by the gladiators**, were **burned alive by Nero**. Tradition reports a **martyr’s death for every disciple**. And disciples have **been suffering and dying in spite of their great faith – as well as because of it** – ever since. The basic underlying reason the Azeries and Turks fought a war with Armenia is because they are Christians living in a land surrounded by Muslims. Even Jesus himself offered a teaching to counter this common heresy – in this the last week of his early life. It’s found in the 16th chapter of the Gospel of John. Aware of his own impending suffering and death, Jesus is talking to his disciples and trying one more time to prepare them for what they will face in this world. |
| 9 | I’m reading Chapter 16:20-22. *Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you*. … Then skipping down to verse 33. *I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage: I have conquered the world.*  Could Jesus have been any clearer in this teaching? *You will weep and mourn, you will have pain, in the world you face persecution*.  Why then are we so surprised? Jesus himself, left that final gathering with his disciples to be betrayed, deserted, denied by his friends, humiliated, tortured and put to death on a cross by his enemies. Why then are we so surprised when pain and suffering and hurt are part of our lives, too? |
| 10 | That’s exactly what Jesus told us would happen. But … **he told us something else too**.   1. He told us that our pain would be **transformed into a joy no one could take from us**. 2. He told us our persecution would make way for peace.   In other words, Jesus told us that God can turn hurt into hope on this side of the grave. That *God really does put the fallen back on their feet*.  How does God do this? How is it different for Christians?  The Christian difference is not the absence of hurts in our lives. It’s what we do with those hurts.  God chooses to work with and through us, not in spite of us or around us. God can turn hurt into hope. It happens when we offer our hurt – our disappointments , our doubts, our failures, and even our suffering – to God so that God might use them for good. |
| 11 | And that, friends, is what we call redemption.  Redemption: Giving something that is no good, or worn out, and receiving in its place something that is new and valuable.  Coupons: Nothing but a little piece of paper with a product label and number. 45 cents. But take it to the store and most times you can get twice that amount off the product.  Redemption is a classic theme of great stories. The hero has made bad choices and done some bad things, but he comes to himself and sees the error of his ways. He offers himself to the ones who are angry and still hurt, to take the punishment so that he can now do what is right, selfless, and what can make life better.  Redemption is what Jesus did on the cross, taking our sins upon himself, suffered and died so that we might have forgiveness and eternal life.  What Christians do with the pain of suffering is the avenue to redemption. Christians offer their suffering to God and God takes the suffering and turns it to joy, joy that can’t be taken away.  [Note: I use the word offer, not give, because the pain and suffering just doesn’t go away. I will always be grieved and have pain at the loss of Wade. But if we offer the pain to God, then it can be redeemed.] |
| 12 | But it is our choice. We can offer it to God and let God work with it and change it. Or we can offer it in bitterness to Satan, or evil or whatever you call the forces that oppose goodness and God, and let it drive you in a downward spiral that only ends in agony, frustration and hopelessness.  Story: Joseph and his brothers. Did him dirty. Sold him into slavery and told Jacob, the father, that a wild animal killed him. Joseph spent many years in slavery and prison. But eventually he was made second in command of the Egyptian empire! His brothers came to Egypt to get food during a famine. They had to go through Joseph to get it. What did Joseph do? Chance to get even. But no Joseph chose to give his hurt and pain and suffering to God years before and God changed it to joy. Joseph says to his brothers: You meant it for harm, but God used it for good. And this change of pain to joy was used to save not only Joseph and his family but the whole nation of Israel! |
| 13 | **Conclusion**  The Christian difference in dealing with suffering is not to say God is unloving and does not exist. Nor is it to say or imply that God only takes care of the faithful. But the Christian difference is that we offer our pain and suffering that is promised to come, and trust God to change that suffering to joy, to take that hurt and struggle and use it to give you peace. This joy and peace will be of the nature that it cannot be taken from you! God puts the fallen back on their feet!! This is the truth! Amen. |