

Suffering

“(Jesus) began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly...” (Mk 8:31)

The musical, Fiddler on the Roof, is about Jewish life in the small-fictionalized village of *Anatevka* in Tsarist Russia at the beginning of the 20th century. The original production, which opened in 1964, became Broadway’s first musical to surpass the 3,000 performance mark. I remember seeing it for the first time during its historic first run when I was a sophomore at Columbia College and have seen it again several times since then. It’s easily on my short list of favorite Broadway shows.

Fiddler begins with a rousing production number; the entire company singing “Tradition,” one of the show’s many memorable tunes. The opening scene depicts a series of brief comical encounters between various people of the village; one between a shopkeeper and a beggar. The shopkeeper gives the beggar a small coin, a *kopeck*. The beggar says: “but yesterday you gave me *two* kopecks.” The man replies “I had a bad day.” The beggar retorts, “So you had a bad day, why should *I* suffer?”

Why do people suffer? That’s the \$64,000 question that has troubled thinkers, great and small, since human history began. Why does an all-powerful and all loving God allow excruciating pain and unspeakable suffering to exist in the world? That’s an even tougher question that thinkers have wrestled with since at least the 6th century BCE when the Old Testament **Book of Job** was written.

Prominent American rabbi and best selling author, Harold Kushner, in 1966 learned that his only son, Aaron, then three-years old, had a rare childhood disease called “progeria,” or pre-mature aging. Sadly, Aaron would never grow much beyond three feet

in height, would have no hair on his head or body, would look like a little old man while still a child and would die in his early teens.

The disease caused the young rabbi to abandon his commonly held and biblically based idea that *if* he were a good and righteous person, God would protect him and his family from tragedy. Kushner went through a difficult period of doubt, what St. John of the Cross termed a “dark night of the soul,” trying to figure out what God’s relationship could possibly be to his son’s terminal illness. He describes the process in his best selling book When Bad Things Happen to Good People, first published in 1981.

In the rabbi’s words, “I became very angry at God. I felt I had kept my part of an implicit bargain, but God had cheated and not kept His.” Kushner turned to reading the **Book of Job** and also Archibald MacLeish’s modern adaptation, J.B. He eventually concludes that God does *not* cause human misfortune. Some misfortune is caused by bad luck, some is caused by bad people, some by our own choices, and some is simply the inevitable result of being human and being mortal, living in a world of inflexible natural laws.

The painful things that happen to us, according this view, aren’t punishments for sin; they’re not part of some grand design on God’s part. Because tragedy is *not* caused by God, we needn’t feel betrayed by God when tragedy strikes. On the contrary, we can turn Him for help in overcoming tragedy, precisely because God is as outraged by it as we are. Indeed, it’s God who gives us the strength to deal with tragedy, who consoles us in our suffering. That’s what the psalmist had in mind when he wrote the exquisitely beautiful and comforting word of the **23rd Psalm**...”the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not

want, he makes me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters... your rod and your staff – they comfort me....”

This realization leads Kushner to a *conversion* experience. From then on, for example, when he goes to a hospital to visit the sick, instead of asking, “Why does God permit this awful disease to exist?” he asks, “Isn’t it amazing that doctors and nurses can be so dedicated in helping people overcome illness? These good people symbolize God’s “healing presence” in the world.

In today’s first reading from the **Book of Isaiah** we hear about the “suffering servant,” who accepts the Lord’s call to follow Him and remains faithful even in the face of suffering. In the reading from **Mark’s** gospel, Jesus dons the mantle of “suffering servant,” announcing that: ..”*the Son of Man must suffer greatly...*” and that his disciples *too* must... suffer. Suffering, in other words, is the price we pay for being human and being alive. Not even Jesus himself was spared.

Evil exists in the world because of what the author of the **Book of Genesis** mythically portrayed happening in the Garden of Eden involving Adam, Eve, the serpent, the apple and free will. The reality is that the Bible contains several *different* answers to the problem of suffering, most of which are at odds with one another. In the final analysis, what many thinkers have concluded is that suffering is a *mystery* which the human mind is simply not capable of understanding this side of eternity.

Our faith teaches, however, that ours is a loving God who intends only good for us; who can bring good out of evil. God, metaphorically speaking, *can draw straight with crooked lines*. Suffering, part and parcel of the human condition, in short, makes no

rational sense whatsoever, but, at least, we have a measure of control over how it affects us, and what sort of people we become because of it.

Out of the Holocaust, for example, came many, many instances of good triumphing over evil – of good people acting *humanely*, even *heroically*, while others acted with unspeakable depravity.

During our trip to Israel earlier this year, in Jerusalem Gloria and I visited *Yad Vashem*, a museum and memorial dedicated to the Holocaust, its six million Jewish victims (1.5 million children) and its over 20,000 real life heroes like *Oskar Schindler* of Germany (portrayed in Stephen Spielberg’s 1993 award winning movie *Schindler’s List*), *Raoul Wallenberg* of Sweden and *Irena Sendler* of Poland. The walkway leading up to the museum’s entrance is lined with carob trees, each dedicated to the memory of a “Righteous Person,” a non-Jew who risked his or her life to save Jewish lives.

Bad people and good people making *bad* choices caused that horrific tragedy to happen. And the sad truth is that just about all of them were Christian. God, however, was able to draw straight with crooked lines when good people made good choices, behaving with loving kindness toward those suffering unspeakable injustice. The corollary, of course, is that if more good people had made good choices, the Holocaust would never have happened.

In the second reading from the **Letter of Saint James**, we are told quite clearly that ...”*faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*” To say you’re a Christian without *acting* like a Christian, therefore, is useless; it’s counterfeit. God draws straight with crooked lines when God’s people *do* what they profess to believe; that is, when they love one another *as* Jesus loved.

Beethoven composed his Ninth Symphony while profoundly deaf. Van Gogh painted masterpieces while deeply depressed, even suicidal. And people with disabilities can lead remarkably productive and inspiring lives despite their physical limitations.

“One advantage of being thrown on your back,” said former bishop of Rochester, Fulton J. Sheen, and “is that you face heaven.” Suffering, you see, can bring us closer to God and to *authentic* discipleship. In other words, suffering can have *redeeming* value. Witness the example of the millions of martyrs throughout history who have died for their faith. We Christians believe that Jesus rose from the dead on Easter Sunday morning. That, after all, is the quintessential example of *God drawing straight with crooked lines*.

Anthony J. Sciolino

Isaiah 50:4-9a; James 2:14-18; Mark 8:27-35.

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time. September 13, 2009 (Cycle B)