

How do we address the problem of evil in our world? As Rabbi Kushner's asked, "Why does God let bad things happen to good people?"¹ The Russian philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev attributes most evil to human freedom. God gave us freedom. The problem is what we do with it. We use it to do good things—like helping people, feeding the hungry, exhibiting hospitality, visiting the sick, and working for justice—but we also use it to hurt one another. We can be judgmental, closed-minded, say hurtful things, and much, much worse. Berdyaev writes, "Freedom is the fatal gift which dooms humanity to perdition."² Why does freedom lead to eternal punishment? Because we have a choice. It is through obedience to God that we grow in faith. When we grow in faith, we might not know the answer to the question 'why does evil exist', but we develop words to discuss it.

Both today's gospel lesson and epistle talk about the nature of salvation. Jesus dealt with his calling to be the Jewish messiah. Paul wrestled with the notion of Jewish people who rejected Jesus. In the gospel, the cries of the Canaanite woman pulled his messianic calling toward a universal one. She wanted a scrap from the table of grace. So, he commended her faith and healed her daughter. In Romans, Paul recognized God's eternal love, asking the rhetorical question, "Has God rejected God's people?" Paul answers his own question in the strongest words he has, *μη γενοιτο*. *By no means!* Paul concludes about salvation and irrevocable gift of grace that either (a) God saves all Jews because some of them believe, or (b) God saves all people, including non-believing Jews.

Despite God's desire for harmony, we find ways to bring dissonance. Amidst the pain and destruction last weekend, a young woman Heather Heyer died. The young man accused of killing her was part of the white supremacist rally. There are places where we should reserve judgment. Is this one of them? *μη γενοιτο*. *By no means!* We can be crystal clear. In any situation when one side includes white supremacists, anti-Semites, neo-Nazis, or any other hate groups, we can unequivocally say, they are wrong and we should stand against them.

I cannot imagine the pain Heather Heyer's parents feel. As I think about the hurt in our city, I am reminded of suffering around the world. Brandon Martinez was one of 40 undocumented immigrants who were crammed in an unventilated trailer. Someone found them on a blistering day near San Antonio. Brandon was one of the lucky ones. He survived.

Regardless of the politics, I cannot imagine the horror his father experienced as sat by his son's hospital bed. Around the world, people are starving for a scrap of grace. Paul says, "The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." The Syrian Civil War has claimed as many as 470,000 casualties. Just on the continent of Africa, there are currently nine ongoing conflicts that claim thousands of lives every year. These include the Somali Civil War, Libyan Civil War, war in Darfur, and Boko Haram insurgency.

How can we talk about God's love in the middle of all of this pain? How would we tell a child in Darfur that God loves her? How would we explain God's irrevocable grace to parents who lost a child to Boko Haram? The problem of evil is not only related to human freedom, but to the void of grace in this world. God loves everyone. God wants everyone to live in peace and to grow in faith. When people hurt one another, whether here in Charlottesville or in Somalia, we do so despite God's continuous grace.

There is an old Chinese parable about a woman whose only son died. In her grief, she went to a sage and asked, "What prayers, what magical incantations do you have to bring my son back to life?" Instead of sending her away or reasoning with her, the sage said to her, "Fetch me a mustard seed from a home that has never known sorrow. We will use it to drive the sorrow out of your life." She went off at once in search of that magical mustard seed. She came first to a splendid mansion, knocked at the door, and said, "I am looking for a home that has never known sorrow. Is this such a place? It is very important to me." They told her, "You've certainly come to the wrong place," and began to describe all the tragedy in their lives.

The woman said to herself, "Who is better able to help these poor, unfortunate people than I, who have had misfortune of my own?" She stayed to comfort them, then went on in search of a home that had never known sorrow. But wherever she turned, she found one tale after another of sadness and misfortune. She became so involved in helping others cope with their sorrows that she eventually let go of her own. It was her quest to find the mustard seed that drove away her suffering.³

God's grace transcends the pain of death and destruction. It might not take the pain away. But, we grow. Perhaps that does not seem like enough. Maybe we want an answer. But, like the Canaanite woman in the gospel, we must keep seeking, keep asking—and we can have faith that God will answer. The exercise of seeking can help us grow. And, it is not an intellectual exercise. When we put our faith into practice and move outside of our comfort zones, we grow and experience God's grace. Amen.

¹ Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (London: Pan Books, 1992).

² Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man*, trans. Natalie Duddington (New York: Harper Torchbooks/The Cloister Library, 1960), 24.

³ <http://www.rogerdarlington.me.uk/stories.html#Story63>