

16th Sunday of Ordinary Time “The Problem of Theodicy”

Bishop Frank Schuster

George Bernard Shaw once told this interesting story. He said, “A Native American elder once described his own inner struggles in this manner: ‘Inside of me there are two dogs. One of the dogs is mean and evil. The other dog is good. The mean dog fights the good dog all the time.’ When asked which dog wins, he reflected for a moment and replied, ‘The one I feed the most.’” Isn’t that the truth?

This weekend the Church reflects on Jesus’ parable of the weeds and the wheat. Jesus is explaining why there is evil in the world. Somehow mysteriously evil is allowed to exist so that greater good can come of it. Most of us take this on faith. We don’t have access to every reason why the world is the way it is, however, if we believe that God is truly omnipotent...God must win in the end. On the other hand, an atheist will simply flat out dismiss the idea of God because of the existence of evil. How can an all good and loving God allow evil to exist?

It is a long-standing argument in the history of philosophy and theology. For theologians and philosophers, the problem of weeds and wheat growing together fall under the umbrella of “theodicy”, arguments that justify God’s existence in the face of the evil we see in the world. For Christians, the answer is simple. For Jesus, the meaning of life is to love God and love neighbor. We cannot love unless we have the freedom not to, and thus, evil must coexist with the good in this world. Whether good or evil triumphs in our lives or in our world for that matter boils down to which one we feed the most. The problem becomes, and I think we all know this on a personal level, once evil has been given the opportunity to take plant in our lives, it becomes very, very difficult to uproot it. As Yoda told Luke in the Empire Strikes Back, “Once you start down the dark path, forever it will dominate your destiny”. Pretty smart dude for a muppet. However, the perniciousness of sin is also why the practice of going to confession is essential. The Sacrament of Reconciliation helps keep the weeds at bay.

However, back to our question of theodicy, of how God can allow evil in the first place if he is indeed all good? In our first reading, it seems that the author of Wisdom agrees that God allows evil so that good can mysteriously come from it. He says as a prayer to God, “Though you are master of might, you judge with clemency, and with much lenience you govern us; for power, whenever you will, attends you...you gave your children good ground for hope that you would permit repentance for their sins.” In other words, it is precisely because God is all powerful that he can transform our very sins into the means for our salvation. The crucifix in our sanctuary stands witness to that. By his wounds we are healed.

However, how often has God been able to take the sins of our past and let these failings become the fertilizer for the grace he had in store for us in the future? As a priest, I have seen this a number of times with young people whose first major relationship ends up in colossal failure because of bad decision making. However, the lessons learned from those failings became the very means for which God was able to prepare him or her for the person he had in mind for them from the beginning. Do you follow? In this sense, it is a very good thing that the Master

Gardener allows the weeds inside of us to sometimes intermingle with the wheat so that greater good can indeed come from it.

Having said all that, it is also important to remind ourselves that, although God can transform even the weeds inside of us into a source for our salvation, we are nevertheless also reminded that this transformation can only come about through personal conversion. There is work we must do on our end. Which is to say, when it comes to the weeds and wheat inside of us, we need to be very, very careful about which one we are feeding in our soul day in and day out. Are we feeding the weeds in our soul that are choking off the wheat or are we nourishing the wheat inside of us, keeping the weeds at bay? Think about what that concretely means for you this week. George Bernard Shaw's story about the wisdom of the Native American is very provocative. Sometimes, inside of all of us are indeed two dogs, one good and one bad. Which one will win over us in the end? The one we feed the most.