

Flip a Coin
Rev. Mark Seifried @ Townsend
Congregational Church, UCC
October 16, 2005 – 22nd Sunday after
Pentecost - Exodus 33: 12-23; Matthew
22: 15-22

Eunice has cancer now because she yelled at her mother when she was five years old. Leon has congestive heart failure because his Uncle Joe drank too much. Albert has been in Worcester State Hospital for five years because he stole a cookie when he was 7-years-old. Ronald has been suffering from Alzheimer's disease for 5 years because he engaged in pre-marital sex. Do you believe any of that?

A few weeks ago, evangelist Franklin Graham spoke of the hurricane-ravaged city of New Orleans, saying, "It's known for Mardi Gras, for Satan worship. It's known for sex perversion. It's known for every type of drugs and alcohol and the orgies and all of these things that go on down there in New Orleans. Reverend Graham continued, "There's been a black spiritual cloud over New Orleans for years." Graham speculated that Hurricane Katrina was part of God's plan for a spiritual revival. I have to wonder who Rev. Graham thinks God is. Does his God flip a coin when He is fed up with human sinfulness to decide which area will be hit by a natural disaster? Last year it was South Asia. Last month, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. This month Pakistan, Guatemala, and New Hampshire.

If we follow Graham's theology of a vengeful God, we can understand why bad things happen to basically good people, or can we? What kind of God is that who pummels loved ones with no indication as to why, when, where, or how? This is certainly not my picture of a God who loves unconditionally. To me, vengeful God theology is bad theology. I'd like to have you think about another bad theology. Some people say, "God never gives us more than we can handle." I have said that. I'd bet some of you have said that. When you think about it, it's bad theology. Life does give some of us more than we can handle, but those things are not sentences from God. Albert is in Worcester State Hospital

because he has a chemical imbalance and a brain that works differently than many of ours. I would go further and say that his brain is working differently than God intended. Being kicked down the stairs when he was a child is the cause and the torment of his mind **is** more than he can handle or he would not be hospitalized. The residents of New Orleans, Alstead, NH and Pakistan have more than they can handle. Gail and Roger are sick with cancer, not because of anything they've done. They are just sick, perhaps from man-made environmental factors. We don't know exactly why, but we do know that we will support them as they undergo chemotherapy and we will pray for their healing. But God did not cause their cancer because they were ready for a test or to punish them. That's absurd and bad theology! Our God, the God of Christ Jesus is perfectly loving and perfectly forgiving!

In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus is being set up by the bad theology of popular politics. It's almost like the fashionable Washington theology of "God is on the side of our country's military" or the one that says, "You're either for **us** or you're against freedom and liberty." To those who use the argument advocating divine calculation, Jesus says, "Whatever! You're going to believe whatever you want, so it doesn't matter what I say. Either way, God loses."

One commentary on this morning's gospel text says that, "Jesus' admonition to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's is a clever response, perhaps one that is appropriate for those who have trouble deciding what goes to Caesar and what to God." Jesus gave a flippant response, and he may have been making the point that nothing belongs to Caesar. Since everything ultimately belongs to God, he was saying that what we believe we own or is due us is actually only on loan to us. Caesar's wealth was not his to keep, and neither is ours." I would add to that, our very lives are on loan.

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A simple illustration of this appears in a book called *The Holy Man*. In this book, people go to the Holy Man Joe for parcels of insight he dispels to visitors. One man goes to Joe and explains that he has lost his wife. The grieving man said, "She had been taken from me. She is gone. I loved her so much. Now I will never see her again." Joe asks, "Did she die," and the man responds, "Yes, that is what I am saying. She is gone." Joe says, "Well she could have left. That would have been worse. Then you would still never see her again but have to suffer

the added pain of rejection. But this is very sad. I am sorry that you had to give her back before she gave you back.”

The grieving man queries, “I beg your pardon? Give her back?” Joe says, “Yes, you are adding to your grief by being such a victim. If you say to yourself that you have given her back, you will feel better. Because you see she was never yours. Nothing you have is yours. It never was yours.” The man is exasperated and snaps, “But that’s crazy, my possessions are mine. My children are mine. And my wife . . .” Joe says, “No, they are not yours. Only you are yours. Not your possessions, not your children, not your wife. You will have to give them all back (to God). You do not get to keep any of them.

And so when we watch television and witness the devastation of the recent hurricanes and local floods, we see that God is taking back the land that has been on loan for centuries. And, yes, we are overwhelmed simply through the experience of witness. It is beyond imagination to comprehend the effects of the devastation in the lives of those directly affected. We watch and listen and our hearts ache for their losses. Nothing will ever be the same for them again. We wonder what God’s role in all these disasters is.

During such times I think of Job and his tremendous losses. I remember the restoration process explored in this ancient drama. The emotional and physical journey Job traveled was incredible, but the spiritual journey was vast. He lost everything through no fault of his own and struggled with all of the "why did this happen" questions. His friends explained and interpreted the events of his life. Their interpretations and explanations were not only wrong, but also added to Job's spiritual burden. Isn't it amazing how much energy we spend on why events occur! Perhaps it would be better to devote that energy on healing and helping instead of explaining or trying to explain the unexplainable. If we read the entire book of Job, we grow weary of listening to Job's friends rant and want to scream, "Just help him!" We spend way too long sitting upon the ash heaps of our lives wondering why and seeking explanations, when what is needed is healing and change.

Rev. Jeannie George says of current acts of God in the news, “Loss comes into our lives in many forms. Life may never be the same, but we must move forward and accept the changes that [God’s] healing and restoration brings. I remember the dialogue assigned to God in the Job drama. God asks Job how he can explain the forces of nature. God

asks Job where he was from the beginning and asks how he can suppose to even begin to understand God's provision through creation and forces of creation. The mighty acts of God are forces of [love, not devastation] that the human mind struggles to comprehend.

"Recently National Geographic did an article on hurricanes in which it was noted that the hurricane served as a great plow of the ocean. This mighty wind plow turned the waters of the oceans in such a way as to oxygenate the seas. Without the hurricane, the forests of sea kelp and plankton would suffocate. Even the atmosphere would be deprived of oxygen. The absence of the hurricane would be more devastating to life as we know it than its presence. Even in such a force is the evidence of God's [love]. There is comfort for me in that. For I know that no matter the loss, there is the presence of God's [tending]. There are many sources of love available in the dominion of God that we cannot explain, but only accept.

Jesus' message is poignant when he says to the Pharisees, "You believe what you want. I'm suggesting that all we have belongs to God because it is God who cares for creation, not Caesar." To attempt to understand God's purpose for creation, and humanity as part of that creation, means we have to step out of ourselves. We have to stop thinking that the world belongs to us and also must realize that humans lack the ultimate capacity to know God. However, we can take comfort knowing that in the worst of circumstances, God will heal. We know that God's healing will not be on our schedule, but that it will come when it is the right time. Even if life is never the same, it will be life nevertheless. Life is a process of change and it is delusion to assume sameness or even constancy. Our lives will be blessed with the love of God and in that thought there is hope.

We are all reeling from the natural disasters that have occurred in the last year: the typhoon in South Asia, the hurricanes in the southern regions of the US, the earthquake in Pakistan and now floods in New England. Some must wonder why all this is happening. An alarmist might believe that Armageddon is imminent. I think that if we go back to the words of the Holy Man and to our scripture we have a better insight to what is happening. The scripture says that nothing is ours. Rather, all we have in this life is on loan: our possessions, our wealth, people we love, even the land. Does it not make sense to think that the land that belongs to God will be renewed? All of creation is renewed and all

that is good returns to God – that includes the land, particularly land near bodies of water and land on tectonic plates. That includes you and me who will be renewed in life and death – in God’s mysterious way and mystifying sense of time.

I close with a prayer: that you would know all life is worthy of renewal, indeed demanded by God. I pray that you would know God’s love is far more vast than what we can understand, that the scheme of creation was set in motion millennia ago, before humans occupied land. Know that we are only temporary observers and inhabitants of this planet. Understand that sometimes people are living where God never intended them. Moreover, I pray that you would know that God is trustworthy. Creation is complex, yet reliable. Were it not so, gravity and tides would cease. Air would be a precarious commodity. If God’s love was not so relentless we would have to struggle for every breath and consciously work to make our heart pump blood. Let us praise God for our very lives with all that we have.

Judith Johnson-Siebold, *Balance Sheet*, The Christian Century.
October 4, 2005

Susan Trott, *The Holy Man* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995) page 29-30

Cathedral of Hope’s morning devotion for Oct. 11, 2005 (Dallas)