
Reflections on Questions Asked by Two Young Brothers from the Parish Fr. Chuck Barthel

Over the past three weeks, I have spent a lot of my time reading, replying to and / or writing emails to individual parishioners and the parish as a whole. For example, the work of the Search Committees continues even in the midst of our current interactive restrictions. One email that I needed to reply to could not be done in a hurry. A mom asked: “What “answers” can I give to my boys who are very anxious about what is going on, who are asking questions like why are these things happening if God loves us so much, and doesn’t God have the power to stop this?” Your children or your grandchildren might be asking these same questions. And if we’re being honest, maybe so are you and me.

The boys are asking one of those ultimate life questions that goes back to the story of Job: “Why do bad things happen to good people?” My first response to their questions is that I do not know why so many people are suffering because of this pandemic. **However**, through the years I have learned how to live with questions unanswered. Here are some of the ways that I do that. I hope that in this article I am able to use images that parents can translate for their children. I am grateful for the insights that I received from Deacon Bob when I started reflecting on nature.

In talking with a child: We have discovered that we never know all information at any time. In the Gospel of Luke, we read that even Jesus grew in wisdom and age. We make our best judgement based on what we know at a certain point in time. As we learn more, hopefully we adjust our judgements and act accordingly. The same can be true of our fears. What you were afraid of when you were younger – bugs, snakes, the dark – you might not be afraid of now. Now, when you are older, you might be afraid of other things such as falling off of your skateboard or diving off the high dive. Both our knowledge and our fears can change over time.

One way to live with the question unanswered:

Along with the other natural disasters such as earthquakes, flooding and tornadoes that we have recently experienced, this pandemic can give us the opportunity to reflect upon our images of God. An image that comes to mind in times like this is what one of my former spiritual directors, who also happened to be a hospital chaplain, shared about his understanding of suffering and God. Sometimes, our image of God is that of a **master puppeteer**, controlling all the events of our lives and world at the same time. Church words that describe this image are omnipotent, transcendent and all-powerful. If this is one’s image of God, then it would seem that God has the power to make things happen differently. If God doesn’t do that, why would anyone want to have a relationship with that kind of a God? What my spiritual director invited me to do instead was to imagine an immanent God who chose to be like us in all things but sin, which is what the Incarnation is all about. This God would be with us in our pain and suffering, whether that is nestling us in God’s arms, or just holding our hand and crying with us. **So, the questions are: What is my image of God? Does it need to change or evolve based on who God is, how God acts and what I am experiencing at the time?**

A second way to live with the question

unanswered: Why do bad things happen to good people? One of the insights that I have held onto from the book with the same title is this: Sometimes, when someone is suffering, it is an opportunity for us **to simply be present** to another person in their pain, suffering or loss. We’re not there to fix it. For most of us that’s not a comfortable position in which to be. But if you are looking for an example of someone who learned how to do it, visualize our mother Mary, along with the others at the foot of the Cross.

A third way to live with question unanswered: In the natural order, everything acts according to its nature. Everything – plants, animals, sea creatures, cells, microbes, viruses, even humanity – follows certain “laws.” Sometimes, when cells, microbes and viruses are acting according to their nature, mutations may occur. When we don’t understand what may be happening according to the laws of nature, we can use the intellectual gifts that God gave us to discover refinements in our understanding of the “laws” or we wait until we discover more.

Reflections on Questions Asked by Two Young Brothers from the Parish (cont'd)

Undoubtedly, humanity has caused some of the natural disasters & the viruses of the world. Science has created others. But sometimes these viruses are just acting according to their nature. I believe that's what is happening in this pandemic. In the case of COVID-19, what we know now is that it "most likely" started with a bat who was a carrier of the virus, who passed it on to another animal at a wet market in the Wuhan Province in China. A wet market is where live meat, fish, produce, and other perishable goods are sold in an open and not very sanitized area. Apparently, the virus which was previously known, "mutated" in such a way that it was able to be transmitted from another animal to a human.

Things in nature happen spontaneously like a leaf falling off the tree in the fall. The leaf is following its nature and when all conditions are right, it separates and falls. What we believe about that leaf is that God created the rules of nature but doesn't necessarily "make it happen," a la the puppeteer of answer #1.

Bad things happen for many reasons. Sometimes we understand why they happen and sometimes we don't. Someday, we may eventually discover why this particular pandemic happened. Or maybe we won't. In any case, I need to feel confident in knowing that God loves me, is offering to me help all the time, is always with me and will never leave me to face the good or the bad stuff alone. God has grasped each of us by the hand and promises to be a rock we can cling to.

In the meantime, our prayers are offered for all those involved in finding a cure for this pandemic, such as virologists, microbiologists, Center for Disease Control personnel and all other medical personnel. Through their round the clock efforts, we will be able to care for those who are most in need.

A Sense of Humor Will Help Get Us Through!!!!



Some possible captions....

- I guess this pastor had unbelievable luck in getting his parishioners have their photo taken for their parish directory.
- What a comfort zone moment for the preacher, since everyone always sits in the same place.
- What a clever way to hide falling asleep!
- Can you hear me now?

Any caption you would like to add????