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## How Could God Do This to Us?

**1 Samuel 8:1-22**

**2 Corinthians 4:13 – 5:1**

There are at least three categories of weeds in my yard. First, there are the weeds that were there before we moved in, that have deep roots and over which I have very little control. Things like wisteria that crawls over and under fences into my yard, and the briars whose tubers are impossible to kill, or the dandelions who come back with renewed vigor if I leave so much as one tiny piece of their root in the ground. I didn't plant these weeds. I don't want these weeds. But the problem is bigger than I can fix. With those weeds, the best I can do is dig them out and cut them back as soon as I see them and remain vigilant to make sure that they don't set seed and spread further on my watch and hope that over time the tubers and roots from which they always spring back will one day die.

Second, there are weeds that spring up because they are so common and set so many seeds that unless I am very vigilant they come up everywhere. Sometimes these plants I like – like the pretty blue Stokes aster that just showed up by my mailbox. I think a bird probably planted it there, but I let it stay because I like the color, but I can't take any credit for it, and it lives because it wants to live. But most of these plants are weeds, like the gripweed that, if I am not careful, can spread thousands of seeds while I am not looking. Sometimes even plants that I planted at some point in the past are so happy that they put out hundreds of seeds and I have to pull up some of them to keep them from taking over. Too much of a good thing is a bad thing. Like the Asiatic Jasmine that is around our church building. It can serve a good purpose as a ground cover, but left unwatched it will take over and it is near impossible to kill. So, before it gets planted, one needs to be certain that it is wanted.

And finally, there are weeds that I chose and planted. Like the freesia bulbs and the crocosmia bulbs that I got from another gardener's yard. The flowers were so pretty and they are great cut flowers. Sure the other gardener warned me to keep an eye out because they were hard to contain and had a tendency to take over if not watched. But I was blinded by the pretty red flowers and was sure that I could manage. . . . . And to this day, those two small bulbs seem to have hatched a plan of complete yard domination. I used to hate to pull them up. But, I have lost all sense of remorse. I now pull up the little bulblets by their stems and toss them with relish on the side of the street with an unhealthy sense of revenge. My main worry is that the

city will compost them and – because I’m pretty sure that you could chop them up and they would still come back – I fear that other unsuspecting gardeners will be infected with my folly. The flowers were so pretty, and the bulbs seemed so small, and I am such a good gardener . . .

There are at least three kinds of evil in the world.

First, there is evil that is chaotic, random and exists no matter what we do. The roots of that sort of evil are deep and persistent. Getting rid of this sort of evil may not even be possible. Often the best we can do is to try to get rid of the effects when evil shows its ugly head. We can be minding our own business and, Wham!, evil hits us without warning. I don’t know why this sort of evil exists, only I know that it does exist. And it seems to be no respecter of virtue or rules or justice: when a family is hit and killed by a drunk driver, or a person who never smoked dies of lung cancer, or Alzheimer’s robs someone we love of their history and memory. Random, chaotic evil can flare up and catch us unprepared and unawares.

Second, there is evil that is so common that we can sometimes forget that it is evil. Lies beget lies beget lies. And everyone does it. A glass of wine or a beer with friends is a celebration, but drinking so much that we can’t remember exactly what happened the next day is an evil. Little things that don’t seem to matter much, when left unattended can begin to take over our lives, and become hard to get rid of. Everyone gets angry. But when we nurture and encourage and nurse our hurts, they can turn into resentment and hostility that can suck the health from other parts of our lives. This sort of evil requires constant vigilance and is easier to get rid of when it is small than once it has taken over our lives.

And finally, there is evil that we chose and wanted and pursued. It looked so good from a distance, and we saw others who seemed to be so happy with what we wanted. Usually this evil comes into our lives because we want what we do not have, and we pursue what looks good from the outside without thinking through the long term effects. Isn’t that how most addictions begin? Whether it was an addiction to alcohol, drugs, food or work, we wanted and pursued more, because it seemed to be such a good thing. Initially we felt better – high, full or successful. But over time, we realized that what we had chosen and wanted was now controlling us and leading us far from the life that we thought we had chosen. We thought that we had to live in that neighborhood, or have that car, or have that 2nd house at the beach. But in time, what we thought we had to have begins to “have” us. We become the “owned” rather than the owner and much of our life is spent paying for, tending, or repairing that prize we so pursued which now feels very heavy.

There is no easy way to explain evil in the world. I don’t think that it is possible. Evil just is! But there are different types of evil. Sometimes we suffer from evil that is random, chaotic and not of our own making. Why that sort of evil is in the world, I do not know. Scripture doesn’t explain where that sort of evil originated. Scripture says, “there was a serpent in the Garden of Eden.” It just is. Our only hope in this case is the hope that says that God is greater than any evil and that evil is temporary, just as we are. There will come a day when we will not be troubled by this sort of evil, but probably that is just not going to happen until we enter the

Kingdom of God. And no one is immune to this random, chaotic evil. Scripture does say that even this evil can be transformed to produce a good outcome – but no one picks this sort of suffering on purpose.

But Scripture is also clear that evil also happens when we fail to pay attention to our habits and our hearts so that we don't allow bad habits and their bitter fruits to make our lives miserable. Often in our lives, evil and sin begin as a good thing. But overextended, every good can become evil. So, thrift when taken too far becomes stingy and miserly. Mercy extended too far becomes permissiveness and chaos. Judgment extended too far becomes legalism and condemnation. We are to watch our hearts and try to keep the common habits and experiences from becoming a source of suffering and evil in our lives and in the lives of others.

And today, we read the story from the history of God's people – from our history – of a third kind of evil. We read a story that reminds us of how it is in our very nature to choose that which will lead us further and further from the love, grace and rule of God. The people of God, living in a land that God had given them, look around and they want what everyone else has – an earthly king. There are good reasons to want a king. Samuel's sons are not the best, and it is the most efficient way to repel enemies or wage wars that can be won. But it is the very wanting what everyone else has that reveals that the people of God have stopped wanting what God had given them – a relationship that required obedience and that produced blessing and peace and justice. But that relationship was difficult. And everyone else . . . . . well, everyone else had a king!

Perhaps the most frightening part of today's story is the realization that God does not coerce us into obedience. God allows us to choose to leave. God allows us to choose to worship things that are not God. God allows us to choose obedience to other kings. God allows us to live so that we will look just like everyone else. God will allow us to have what we say we want, even when the consequences of our choices cause us pain and suffering. God created us for love and obedience and relationship. But God does not force us to do any of those things, choosing instead to invite us to love God freely.

The people of Israel do get a King. God guides the prophet Samuel to anoint Saul as the first King over Israel. And there are some real benefits. There are good kings and bad kings. David is blessed and anointed as the King from which the messiah would one day come for the whole world. But, there is great evil as well, and much suffering that comes from this clamor to "have a king like everyone else!" God doesn't desert his chosen people. In fact, despite their disobedience and willfulness, God blesses and continues to guide. But there are some very painful and long lasting consequences that grow from this choice to be governed by a king rather than to choose to remain faithful to God as Ruler of the Universe and Lord over their lives.

Paul's words to the Corinthian Church remind us that this life is a mix of good and evil. Scripture is very clear that God created the world good. But Paul, and we, know evil and suffering in this life also. Paul's words of encouragement are to followers of Christ who know

both the beauty and pain of this life -the evil and the good. And Paul reminds us that while suffering is just part of what it means to live in this world, that we are slowly being changed – even through the evil and suffering – to be made ready for an eternal reality for which we long. We are to expect that suffering will come and evil will happen.

Even so, says Scripture, God does not abandon us. Instead, when we find ourselves suffering or in the midst of chaos, we do take comfort knowing that there is no evil (justly suffered or unjustly suffered) that God cannot redeem. And we believe that one day, all evil – both the evil that seems to have such deep roots it cannot be eradicated and the evil that we have chosen through our own willfulness – will be overcome.

Our task is to tend the gardens (our lives) that God has entrusted to our care – regularly pulling the weeds of greed, lies, disobedience and sloth while they are still small – knowing that very often our suffering is of our own choosing. And if we are unsure of what to do, then the question we are to ask ourselves is, does this help us love God, self and others? It is the love of God that gives us the courage to keep on going even when random evil knocks us flat. It is the desire and the pursuit to love God that helps us know the difference between a weed and a good plant. And it is the love of and obedience to God that helps us want the good, and helps us not pursue what is bad for us. And we are reminded, over and over again by Scripture, that when we choose what is not good, when we choose to serve another king – even then God does not desert us, but continues to call and to lead and to teach and to redeem. Even when we are not faithful, God is faithful still. Evil, of every sort cannot, kill the love God has for us. Even there – far from what God wants for us – even there we are not beyond God's ability to save, to redeem and to love.

Let us pray:

Help us to love you more than any other god, idol or pursuit. Fill us with a desire to serve your purpose, more than we want to serve even ourselves. Teach us to know the difference between choices that will help us grow in love and grace and choices that will lead us far from home. And, even as we struggle and suffer, love us O Eternal and Steadfast God. Help us to love you in return. Amen.