

**"The Reason and the Result"**  
**Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Lectionary Year A**  
**July 27, 2008**  
**Texts: Romans 8:26-39 (TEV); Genesis 29:15-28**  
**Dr. David T. Howeth**

Has something like this ever happened to you? A crisis has occurred in your life. Maybe that crisis is the death of a loved one. Maybe it is the discovery that you have a major illness. Maybe it is the loss of your job. Maybe it is a divorce. Whatever the crisis is, it involves pain and suffering. Because it is *your* crisis, you are hurting.

And in the midst of your pain and suffering, some well-meaning friend tries to comfort you and make you feel better. That friend says to you something like, "There is a reason for what is happening to you. You may not be able to see that reason right now, but there is one. Everything happens for a reason, you see, and we must have faith that God knows what he is doing. The Lord works in mysterious ways." Have you ever heard something like that when you were experiencing a particularly difficult time in your life?

According to that kind of thinking, God causes all things, bad things and good things, to happen for a reason, and we, as Christians, are supposed to have faith that the reason, because it is God's, is a good one. The basis given for this understanding of God's role in our lives is often a familiar verse out of our text from Romans for this morning. It is Romans 8:28, the first part of which states in the NRSV, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, . . ." Another

translation, the NASB, puts it even more strongly: "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God . . ." It's no wonder that some people think everything happens for a reason and that God's will is ultimately that reason. It certainly seems to say so in this verse from Romans 8.

I don't believe that the will of God is the reason everything and especially bad things happen to us the way they do. So I have some real problems with the way this verse is translated in the NRSV and the NASB. To begin with, in the NRSV the wording "all things work together for good for those who love God" seems to imply that there are certain benefits in life that naturally are extended only to those who love God. It's like the old Coke ad: Things go better with God. In other words, loving God gives you an advantage, the inside track, a head start. You are better off in every way—physically, mentally, materially, relationally, emotionally—with God on your side.

But unfortunately we know all too well that it just ain't so. We know that loving God—even with all of our being—does not keep us from experiencing difficulties, defeats, and disasters. Being a Christian doesn't exempt us from suffering. So much for the translation in the NRSV. And the NASB translation isn't any better. It suggests that for believers anyway, God indeed *causes* all things to work together for good. Boy, that makes me feel great. God causes all the things that happen to me, even the really bad things. So what if they wind up doing me some good. I'm not crazy about the idea of a God up there sticking it to me, no matter what the reason is.

I think I have a better idea that I want to share with you. *Let's*

*keep God out of the reason side of the equation.* Let's not make God responsible for the bad things that happen to us. Let's not say that God's will is the reason that everything happens. Instead let's put God on the other side of the equation. Rather than claiming God is involved in the *reason* that both good things and bad things happen to us, let's say that God is involved in the *result* of both the good things and the bad things that happen to us. God is a part of the result of things more than the reason for things.

God, I believe, is more interested in the net result than in the reason. Let me repeat that. *God is more interested in the net result than in the reason.* God is always working in our lives to see the best possible result occur in any and all the situations we encounter. Now I know what some of you are saying: "But what about this verse?" Well fortunately we have more than one translation of Romans 8:28, and I happen to prefer the way it is rendered in the Good News Bible. It says there, "We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, . . ." Do you hear the difference between this translation and the others I have mentioned?

In this translation God is not directly responsible for all things. To paraphrase the popular bumper sticker of a few years ago, "Stuff happens"—good stuff and bad stuff. And a lot of the stuff that happens, God couldn't possibly want to see happen. But in all things, both the good and the bad, God is at work, according to this translation. And notice that in this translation God doesn't do all the work by himself. God works *with us* for redemptive possibilities, for a good result. God doesn't just make it happen. God enables, God facilitates, God empowers

our own efforts to make the best of even the worst of our circumstances.

I could stop right now, but I'm not going to. And the reason I'm not going to is that I am not willing to leave what I have said in the abstract. I want to apply what I have said to a specific situation. So what I want to do now is to look at the Old Testament story we have for this morning as a way of illustrating what I am talking about. Let's see if we can examine this story with God on the result side rather than on the reason side.

You will recall that Isaac had two sons: Esau, the first born, and his twin brother, Jacob, the heel-grabber or trickster. Jacob manages to trick his brother out of his birthright, and, by dressing up as his brother, steals Isaac's blessing that is meant for Esau as the firstborn. Then Jacob does what his protective mother insists and takes off for Mesopotamia to marry one of his Uncle Laban's daughters.

Here is where our story picks up. Laban has two daughters, Leah, the elder, and Rachel, the younger. When Jacob meets Rachel, it is love at first sight. Rachel is quite attractive, a shapely and poised woman, but there is something about Leah that just doesn't turn Jacob on. We don't know what she looked like; the best we can do is guess. Her name literally means "cow." Maybe that's no accident; maybe her name fit. And whereas our translation says that her eyes were lovely, the Hebrew text says that her eyes were "weak." We're not sure what that means exactly. Maybe Leah was crossed-eyed or went around squinting all the time or didn't know how to use her eye makeup well. I think these descriptions are the Old Testament's way of saying that while Rachel

was a major babe, Leah had a good personality.

Anyway Jacob wants to marry Rachel, so he agrees to work for Laban, his uncle, for seven years to have her. Jacob works his seven years, but when it gets to the wedding night, Ol' Laban pulls a switch on Jacob. As the country song says, Jacob goes to bed at 2:00 with a "10" and wakes up at 10:00 with a "2." The trickster gets tricked. Of course Laban justifies his actions by claiming that the older daughter has to be married off before the younger one can, a rule he had not bothered to mention seven years earlier. So Jacob works another seven years in order to get to marry Rachel, his true love.

Why the dirty tricks? Why does Jacob have to wind up marrying someone he doesn't want to and waiting to marry the one he wants? Why? If we continue in the Bible and look at the rest of this chapter and the next, we might be tempted to say that it is for a reason and that God has something to do with that reason. We know that Jacob, who later gets renamed Israel, winds up with twelve sons. Those twelve sons become the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel. And it is most likely because the nation of Israel had those twelve tribes that Jesus picked twelve disciples. And it is because of those twelve disciples that we have the Church. So it is pretty important that Jacob had twelve sons. OK?

Do you know how many of those twelve sons Rachel gives birth to? Two. Rachel bears Jacob two sons, and she dies having the second one. Leah bears Jacob six sons. In case you are still awake and counting, that's only eight sons. The other four came from handmaids. Two came from Leah's servant, and two came from Rachel's. So Leah is responsible, in one way or another, for eight out of the twelve sons born

to Jacob.

Now it would be easy and completely tempting to say, knowing all this, that the reason Jacob had to marry Leah and not just Rachel, as he had hoped, was so that he would wind up having all twelve of these sons. It would be easy and completely tempting to say that God set things up that way. Why did Jacob have to marry Leah? Why did Jacob have to work an additional seven years for Laban in order to get to marry Rachel? Why did Jacob get the shaft? It was God's will. The reason, known beforehand by God and brought about by God, was so that Jacob could be the father of twelve sons.

But was that really the reason? Do we have to see it that way? I don't think so. What kind of a God makes people go through what Jacob went through? Let's don't make God the bad guy in this story. Jacob has to work an additional seven years for his uncle because Laban is a first-class jerk. Jacob gets tricked into marrying Leah because his uncle is father-in-law from hell. That's the reason, not God's will. God is not the reason the kind of deceit, dirty tricks, and double-crossing that occur in this story take place.

But God *is* a part of the result. It turns out that Leah is blessed with the gift of easy childbirth, and Jacob benefits. Rachel only has two sons, to be sure, but guess what? *They are the most important sons.* One is Benjamin, the baby, and the other is Joseph, who later in the story rises to prominence in Egypt and saves his whole family from famine.

Does God cause all things, even bad things, to happen to you? Is God the reason you are having financial difficulties? Is God the reason

someone you love abuses alcohol or drugs? Is God the reason your family of origin was dysfunctional? Is God the reason you never could have children or that your child has died or that you are estranged from one or more of your children? Is God the reason you are out of work? Is God the reason your child has a learning disability or a physical handicap? Is God the reason someone you love is terminally ill? Is God the reason you are widowed? Is God the reason you and your spouse have trouble communicating? Is God the reason you are depressed? No. No. No.

The reason for these things has more to do with who we are and the way our world operates than with who God is and the way he operates. But the good news, the really good news, is that no matter what happens to us, no matter how good or how bad it is, and no matter what the reason is, God works with us to see that at least some good result is a possibility. The Apostle Paul says it clearly: Nothing, absolutely nothing, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And so God is not the reason everything happens to us, but God is working in everything that happens to us. And with our cooperation, God will bring about the best possible result.