

## CRIBB<S> NOTE – FEBRUARY 22, 2009

Journalists, novelists, detectives, scientists, and theologians are well practiced at asking fundamental questions about events that capture our attention. The first thing they want to know is “what happened?” That defines the important object of their inquiry.

Next, they must determine the significant parties. “Who is involved?” Identity is the key to connecting activities to the human family.

Then, there is the matter of timing. “When did it take place?” People demand to know the moment something occurred. “What were we doing when it happened” is a question that ties us to the event.

The inquirer also needs to find the location. “Where did it occur?” No matter how far away the situation happened, we are touched by the sense of how close it was to us. We wander, “Could it happen here to me?”

That takes the investigator to the mechanics of the occurrence. “How did it happen?” What clever tactics were used to execute the deed?

As the proverbial ‘ducks’ begin to line up with each answer, new light is shed on the subject. We discover answers to our elemental queries: what, who, when, where, and how. But the most confounding question has yet to be asked. It is difficult and requires the greatest depth of exploration and explanation. Perhaps that is the reason many contemporary reporters and pundits don’t even ‘bat an eye’ as they ignore it. “Why did it happen?”

My Godfather, Willie Thomas, a very wise man who spent many years pondering the human condition, used to say, “You will have unanswerable questions, but ask them anyway.” He encouraged me not to back away from probing the “whys” of life.

Children are very persistent in their pursuit to learn everything about what is behind that which is going on in front of them. One question: “Why?” leads to another question: “Why?” They don’t let go until they are absolutely sure their questions have been answered.

Adults also pursue a lingering inquiry. “Why am I here?” “What is the purpose of my life?” When troubled times prevail and seem to have no end, the question becomes even more pronounced. We fall on our knees and pray to God for answers.

“Why is this happening to me (my child, my spouse)?”

Currently, the Sunday Adult Bible Study group that meets twice a month in the Stillspeaking Theater is pouring over the story of Job, God’s righteous servant, who found himself the pawn in a cosmic contest between Good and evil.

As Job tries to understand the sudden change in his life’s circumstances that reduced him from a wealthy man with a family to a diseased-ridden widow who lost everything he owned, his friends surround him with their various ‘answers’. They seemed to know with great certainty why his life shifted so radically. Unfortunately, they were less than helpful as they accused him of sinning and acting against God.

Of course, their explanations of his condition were consistent with the superstitions of their day.

People thought someone got sick because s/he offended God. They felt Job’s misery was the result of his fall from grace.

During a recent Tuesday night Soul Food Bible Study group discussion, we considered the value of human life.

“Human beings are the ‘loving image of God’ who reflect God’s presence in the world,” I said. Our faith teaches us that God creates humankind with a ‘divine design’ for the purpose of worshiping only God. Every human being possesses God’s attributes of love, imagination, creativity, compassion, and forgiveness.

When we think about the sanctity of every person, we dedicate ourselves to the preservation of human life. We become sensitive to any condition that threatens the well-being of anyone anywhere. We realize that whenever people suffer God suffers with us.

In order for life to have true meaning, we must be engaged in the protection of every person against threats or assaults. That does not mean we are ordered to arm ourselves with weapons to ward off each other.

Instead, we strive to build and maintain community in which everyone is accepted and no one feels rejected.

The reason I opposed Proposition 8, the ban on same-sex marriage, is because it threatens the equality of people who have been labeled and scandalized. Same gender-loving couples who have committed themselves faithfully to each other in loving relationships are denied the same protections of other married people. That is wrong and hurtful. It violates community.

My commitment to immigrant communities in California and across the United States as a member of the United Church Immigration Task Force and the Romero Center for Border Ministries in San Ysidro is based on my faith.

God instructs us to receive the stranger as a neighbor. Instead, draconian policies that militarize the Mexico-USA border and allow raids carried out in workplaces make us enemies to our neighbors. It is sinful and puts us on the wrong side of history.

My late pastor the Rev. Dr. Cleo Malone, founder of the Palavra Tree in San Diego, worked his whole life with the mantra, "Put neighbor back in neighborhood."

Such an endeavor broadens our understanding of purpose. It gives us reason to become more involved in social justice actions to elevate the quality of life for people who have lost hope.

One of the most heart-wrenching experiences is to witness despair that develops into a mindless state of tyranny or terrorism. When people lose their way and can't hold on to a purpose for doing good, the world is put at risk and God feels our suffering.

Asking "why?" is critical at every juncture where we confront the difficult and, seemingly, unanswerable questions of life. Superficial or shallow responses are not sufficient and only offer a "tipping of the toe" into the deep waters of sincere quests.

In order to achieve a greater sense of purpose, we need each other to inspire and encourage us to live more fully in solidarity with others who desire to live as well. This is not a campaign to increase material possessions or worship at the temple of idolatry. Rather, we seek to live in harmony as brothers and sisters.

The purpose of Jesus living in the world as one of the oppressed people in a repressed, occupied Palestinian community was to model how we are the answer to our nagging, unanswerable question. We live in reflection of God's love for humanity. We live to embody that love in our relationships and interactions with other human beings. We live to revere God and share God's reverence for life in its many and varied expressions.

Truly, everyone is the 'loving image of God'. As such, when we become aware of the importance of life among others, we begin to answer the only question that ultimately matters.

"Why?" becomes "Because..." Then we will actually know why we are alive and why God trusts us with the whole of Creation. That is mighty exciting Good News!