

**Sermon in A Bag**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
**Rev. Jennifer Gingras**  
**February 23, 2020**

*We gathered questions from the congregation over a few weeks. At best, my responses are incomplete. Some of these would make for an entire sermon (or even a sermon series!)*

**Question One: Why is life so hard sometimes if God loves us or is taking care of us? (Anon)**

How do we explain what we see in this world, if God is good? Terrorist attacks, sex trafficking, racism, world hunger, homelessness, domestic violence, cancer? Subconsciously, we probably ask ourselves questions like these quite often. Then we're likely to think - something isn't right here. Something is really, really wrong. This isn't how life is supposed to be!

There is no question that there is pain and intense suffering in this world.

Some of it can be explained by selfish, hateful actions on the part of others. Some of it is a result of systems of oppression that seem beyond our control. Some of it defies a credible explanation in this life. But I believe that God is aware of our pain and needs. Jesus said to his disciples, *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."*<sup>8</sup>

So, WHY do bad things happen, and why isn't this world a better place?

I guess the why has to do with free will. People are given the freedom to choose how they are going to live, what priorities they are going to work towards, and sometimes that leads to negative consequences for other people, there's a ripple effect. And sometimes the bad things are just entirely random.

This is when the metaphor of the parent God is helpful for me. My parents did not save me from every bad thing that could ever happen to me – that's just an impossible job. They would have had to wrap me up in bubble wrap and duct tape and raise me in an empty room all by myself. Instead, I was given the freedom to learn from my mistakes (or the mistakes of others) by experiencing consequences. And I like to think that the random bad stuff that happened through no fault of my own helped me learn compassion and empathy, because it led me to be better able to connect with others who suffer and try to do something about it through my words and actions.

I believe that God leans forward when bad things happen. We feel the compassion and help from those who give us support during difficult times, people bear the spark of God's love to us. Our role as followers of Jesus is to continue to support one another through the difficult times and the uplifting times.

**How can we do a better job of uplifting what faith traditions share (have in common), rather than highlighting our differences? (David Bailey)**

One word – relationship. Find the opportunities to learn about other faith traditions. Sit down for a cup of tea with someone from another tradition. Attend their worship service and listen for commonalities. Tell your friends about what you saw and heard. Push back on stereotypes when you hear them.

If you have a hard time starting there, another way is through education. I recommend reading the “Book of Joy” in which Nobel Peace Prize Laureates His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu look back on their long lives to answer a single burning question: *How do we find joy in the face of life's inevitable suffering?*

They trade intimate stories, tease each other continually, and share their spiritual practices. By the end of a week filled with laughter and punctuated with tears, these two global heroes had stared into the abyss and despair of our time and revealed how to live a life brimming with joy. The Archbishop has never claimed sainthood, and the Dalai Lama considers himself a simple monk. They offer us the reflection of real lives filled with pain and turmoil in the midst of which they have been able to discover a level of peace, of courage, and of joy to which we can all aspire in our own lives.

The most important thing, whether you focus on relationship or education, is this... don't be frightened by someone of another religion. Fear is a great divider of people. Be curious.

**How do we know that God isn't a human creation made for our comfort? Or does it matter? (Jacob Parker-Burgard)**

The short answer is, we don't. I'm a faith professional, and I can't prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that God exists. No one has done an interview, or taken a picture, or found any scientific evidence that God exists. We don't know much but what tradition and culture has taught us. When that's not enough, it can be pretty frustrating!

When I encounter something that tests my faith or my beliefs, I know that it's time to step back, to pray, to listen and look for the Holy around me. For me, engaging in that practice has always brought me back to a sense of connection, peace and calm that I can only explain metaphorically as the work of God's hand. For me, helping others try and experience that kind of peace – if I can – is what matters.

**Why do we have flags behind the pulpit? (David Walker)**

Here's the thing... the placement of flags in church has always been controversial in American history.

Timothy Wesley tells the story in his book [The Politics of Faith During the Civil War](#), of a wartime Methodist church in border-state Missouri that was being used by both Northern and Southern Methodist congregations.

The Southern Methodists arrived one Sunday morning to find an American flag hanging from the pulpit, left over from the Unionists' meeting. Some Unionists were attending the Southern Methodist meeting that day, and after the sermon, they took down the flag and held it over the door, trying to force the Southern Methodist minister to walk under it. Of course, this was too much for the Southern sympathizers to take. One pro-Southern woman grabbed the flag, threw it on the ground, and stomped on it to show her contempt for Lincoln and the Union. Clearly, church and the flag had become hotly politicized!

Our church historian, Gary Thompson, was kind enough to look into when we think MCC began displaying flags in our Meetinghouse. He has a limited number of pictures taken of the chancel, he had some of them made into a poster for the Victorian Christmas event that you can see more closely at coffeehour.

Any photographs he found before 1922 do not show any flags. Post 1922 (we know it's so because of electric light), the American flag appears in two out of three. In 1965, it appears the flag had been removed. In 1985, both the American and Christian flags appear in the places they occupy now, the American on the right and the Christian on the left. Gary believes they were probably installed during the time of Luther Pierce's pastorate (dates), who was both a WWII veteran and an advocate of ecumenism.

Today, displaying both is a common practice, one that you may see in many sanctuaries. But when you think about it, there is really no way to display both flags together that does not dishonor one flag or the other. Now, hear me out on this, it's complicated!

In the Bible, when things are placed on the right it signifies higher honor than — and priority over — placement on the left.

First of all, there are those who say the Christian flag should always have the place of highest honor when it is displayed, because it is a symbol of our allegiance to Jesus Christ, who is above all others. And this is true, it is a cardinal tenet of the Christian faith that our loyalty to Christ comes above all other earthly loyalties.

The Christian flag originated almost a hundred years ago in churches that usually did not display a cross in the sanctuary. Today, of course, most UCC churches have a cross in their sanctuary in what is intended as the place of highest honor. Since this cross serves the same function as the Christian flag, it renders the Christian flag unnecessary.

On the other hand, The Flag Code (United States Statutes at Large, Seventy-seventh Congress, Second Session 1942, Volume 56 — Part I, Public Laws) states in Section 3 (k): *"When displayed from a staff in a church or public auditorium, the [American] flag should occupy the position of honor and be placed at the clergyman's or speaker's right as he faces the congregation or audience. Any other flag so displayed in the chancel or on the platform should be placed to the clergyman's or speaker's left as he faces the congregation or audience."*

A further difficulty arises from the fact that we lead worship from various places during different parts of the service — pulpit, lectern, communion table and baptismal font. So it's really impractical to follow the code correctly.

There is still another difficulty in displaying the American flag in the place of highest honor during worship. It is one of the oldest and most universal Christian understandings that when we come together for worship, our gathering consists not only of God and the visible congregation, but also includes (even though invisibly) the whole universal church of all times and all places, in heaven and on earth. Even if everyone visibly present is an American citizen, most of those invisibly present are not.

Some immigrant and ethnic minority groups embraced the idea of displaying the American flag in religious services as a way to affirm their patriotism. Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox immigrants from Europe routinely displayed the flag in parades and meetings in the 1920s. Perhaps, those recent immigrants simply believed in the promise of American liberty.

We in the United States wisely separate church and state. As American Christians, we honor the cross and we honor the flag; but we keep them physically separate from each other.

As to the “why” of the original question, I like to think about it in these terms. With the American flag present in our worship space, there is a visual representation of our responsibility as citizens to care for each other. To hold ourselves to the highest ideals of not only our faith, but our citizenship as well.

**Does MCC have any celebration / homage to Mary? As a former Catholic I still say a Hail Mary.**  
**(Gabriela Diblasi)**

In the Catholic Church, the veneration of Mary, mother of Jesus, includes prayer, pious acts, visual arts, poetry, and music. Popes have encouraged it, while also taking steps to reform some manifestations of it. Belief in the incarnation of God the Son through Mary (in Greek, she is the *Theotokos, the God Bearer*) is the basis for calling her the Mother of God, which was declared an important dogma of the church at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

Faithful Catholics still turn to Mary as an Intercessor, she is someone they can pray to who can take their prayer to God. During the Protestant Reformation, this concept of intercession was replaced with the belief that every practicing Christian can pray to God directly.

Accordingly, over the past 500 years since the Reformation, Mary has become a less central figure to Protestants. She is highly respected as the Mother of Jesus, sure, but not as an intercessor. This is why our worship here at MCC does not typically include any of these ancient Marian prayers, like the Hail Mary.

But I wonder sometimes if this was kind of a demotion for Mary in the long run? After all, Mary is the embodiment of the sacred feminine. The removal of that, over time, has caused a ripple effect in the Western Protestant institutional church in which women’s voices may not be as important as men’s. On a practical basis, I’d say that if it is your practice to pray to Mary or any of the Saints, and that brings you peace, keep doing it – you are still welcomed here at MCC!

**What about suffering? How can we use our trials to get closer to God? (Susan Walker)**

I think what this question is poking at is what St. John of the Cross called “The Dark Night of the Soul”. And many, so many of us, experience it.

I know it’s a popular theory that the means to God is through suffering, but I don’t believe that.

Suffering has the power to empty us of the false self—that in great suffering, we are brought before God emotionally naked and that only in that nakedness can we be re-dressed and strengthened.

Sometimes suffering can work well in the lives of people who have been running in the wrong direction. Pain can be a valuable reset button, it has the power to stop the momentum and turn a person around in the direction of hope, light, and awareness.

But we all know that suffering can also enter the life of someone who has always done the right thing, who is blameless. In this case, it has the power to diminish or even extinguish their faith, or the faith of those who love them. And although the suffering may be endured well, it can be many years before they may see the time they spent as illuminating or faith-building.

I will always maintain that Love, not suffering, is our best teacher. God is Love—and suffering has less to do with God than with our broken-down world. That in fact, God abhors suffering as much as we do, and

empowers us to end it. In my life and in the lives of amazing people I have had the privilege to know, great suffering has been unavoidable.

I've learned that in the midst of the terrible suffering of a loved one, it is sometimes impossible to find God, because God has already entered in extreme and unfamiliar ways. While we are desperately searching everywhere for divine nurturing and care, we find that it is we who have been empowered by God to provide that care for another. Somehow, we are mysteriously given the grace to do nearly impossible things.

If right now you find yourself in an extreme situation, searching everywhere for God, who seems to be nowhere to be found, look at yourself. Look at your actions. Look at the expanding magnitude of your love. Look at your ability to be present in the face of great pain, your ability to endure and persist and continue to put everything aside but this—your strength to love. Or if you are the sick one—your ability to respond to that love. To receive it. Here you will find God.

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### **Children's Message**

#### **How was God created and when was he born? (Coralina)**

The Biblical answer is that nobody created God. God always was, is, and always will be. God did not work up into a position to be God neither did God inherit the position from a parent. God has no beginning and will have no end, an eternal being.

The name that was used in the Hebrew Bible for God is Yahweh, which is believed to be a form of the Hebrew verb 'hayah', which means "to be" ultimately meaning "the eternal One" or "self-existing One."

Another thing to consider is that human beings have always – since the dawn of time – thought about a being greater than themselves. The earliest cave dwellers drew pictures on their wall of what they believed God to be.

We think of God in human terms, because we have a relationship with God. But God is bigger than our imaginations, and is a great Mystery.

#### **Why is there death? (Drake)**

One of the hardest things we deal with when people or pets we love die. I remember when my grandmother died a few years ago, how much I missed her laugh (and her cookies). It makes me sad because I want to be able to spend more time with her.

But, the truth is, we all will die, at some point because our bodies just don't live forever. And if everyone who ever lived was still alive, this would be one crowded Planet Earth!

Our faith tells us that when we die, our soul goes home to be with God forever. I don't know how it works, because I haven't been there yet. But it gives me comfort and hope to believe it.

Scientists tell us that according to the first law of thermodynamics, the energy that powers all life continues on, it can never be destroyed, it can only be transformed. I believe that is true. In fact, the love we have for people and pets who have died never goes away! Their love lives on in us.

(Not a question, but a comment from Jackie Bleakney): I like to think of those who are gone as only around the corner.

### **Did Noah forget the unicorns? (Lily)**

Unicorns are mentioned in the Bible nine times in the books of Numbers, Deuteronomy, Job, Psalms, and Isaiah. Since all of these instances are post-flood, it's a good possibility that writers were referring to what we know today as the Rhinoceros.

There was a song recorded by the Irish Rovers called the Unicorn Song. The lyrics state:

A long time ago, when the Earth was green, There was more kinds of animals than you've ever seen. And they ran about and played while the Earth was being born, And the loveliest of all was the unicorn.

The Lord seen some sinning and it caused Him pain. And He said, 'Stand back, I'm going to make it rain!' He said, 'Hey, Brother Noah, I'll tell you what to do, Go and build me a floating zoo,' 'and take some'.....

'Green alligators and long-necked geese, some humpty backed camels and some chimpanzees. Some cats and rats and elephants, but sure as you're born. Don't you forget My unicorns.'

Old Noah was there to answer the call, He finished up the ark just as the rain started to fall. Then he marched in the animals two by two, And he called out as they came through, 'Hey Lord,' 'I've got green alligators and long-necked geese, Some humpty backed camels and some chimpanzees. Some cats and rats and elephants, but Lord, I'm so forlorn, I just can't find no unicorns!'

And Noah looked out through the driving rain, Them unicorns were hiding, playing silly games. Kicking and splashing while the rain was pourin', Oh, them silly unicorns!

So, no, it appears, (if we believe the song), that Noah tried really hard to find them, but the Unicorns missed the boat!

Or maybe they didn't... because in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the unicorn was considered to be an extremely shy and wild woodland creature, a symbol of purity and grace, which could be captured only by a young girl.