

Hot Topics: "Is Life a Test?"

Roman 5:1-11

August 11, 2013

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The 91 requested submissions to our "Hot Topic" sermon series reflect the intelligence of this amazing congregation. As I brag to my colleagues whenever I get the chance, I do preach to rocket scientists each week! Questions about the meaning and purpose of life and religion's contribution towards such mysteries abounded in the "Hot Topic" suggestions. Grouping them into a genre, this question summed them up the best:

I believe that God created the entire universe. I believe in the concept of "collective consciousness" that we are connected to everything in the universe without the limits of linear time through the conscience that God gave us. So, if our spirit or energy exists before and after our time on earth, what would be the reason for our living on earth as human beings? Is this existence a test of some sort?

That is an absolutely brilliant question from one of many brilliant people in this church. The Greek philosopher Plato asserts that one finds true wisdom not in our answers but in our questions. If so, we have an abundance of wisdom in this community.

So let's wrestle with this question this morning together, "Is life a test?"

In the most generic sense of the term, we all know that life is full of trials and temptations, challenges that come along that test our patience, strength and morals. That's true when we are 5 years old or 105 years old. Failures, suffering and tragedy can come along in the most comfortable life and is the daily lot of all-too-many of God's children.

In the Lord's Prayer Jesus teaches us to pray, "...and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil..." It can also be translated as "...and do not bring us to the time of testing...." (Matthew 6:13) Life would be so much easier if everything went the way we hoped and planned but rarely does it work out that way. So at the most basic level, "yes" life is a test. How we respond to and endure those challenges will form who we are as people for good or ill. Our Christian tradition has a lot to say about that.

The Abrahamic religions in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions understand time to be eternal and linear; with a beginning and an end. Other cultures, such as South Asian, understand time to be cyclical; an eternal repetition of beginnings and endings.

Hindu, Sikh, Jain and Buddhist concepts of Karma/Dharma are the basis for their doctrines of reincarnation; each individual life is an opportunity to advance one's destiny in hopes of "nirvana" as one's spirit joins the eternal. For such religions "salvation" is liberation from rebirth in the cycle of life and union with the cosmic consciousness. This may occur at any time in life

or after it. Life is very much a "test" in such philosophy, with each moment and relationship an opportunity to do the right thing in order to advance one's destiny towards nirvana.

The Abrahamic religions understand that life is a "test" but in a very different way. As linear cultures Judaism, Christianity and Islam each have long traditions with a blissful beginning in paradise and a catastrophic "the end of time" and a "judgment day" associated with it. The New Testament book of Revelations has a most vivid description of this moment at the end of time:

Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. (Revelation 20:11-12)

However we come to the scriptures in a variety of hermeneutic; literal, in their historical context, as poetry and metaphor or a combination of all three. In our tradition we can summarize that at "the end of time" everyone who ever lived throughout history will stand before the Throne of God and be judged one at a time according to their deeds while living on earth that are recorded in the "book of life". If their name isn't there they get thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15). [The topic of another sermon and not to be associated with this series' graphics of flames!]

So in this sense, "life is a test" in that one must live in such a way as to get ones' name in the Book of Life so to avoid the lake of fire. How does one pass the test? Our scripture lesson from last week mentions a list of those behaviors that fail the test:

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death. (Revelation 21:8)

The writer of Matthew suggests that Jesus has his own list:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. (Matthew 25:31-40)

So in our tradition we think of life as a test, that we are each held accountable for how one lives one's life and that there are eternal consequences as a result.

Put this then into relationship with our lesson from Romans this morning. The fifth chapter which was so significant for Protestant Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Wesley, the apostle Paul profoundly describes the eternal meaning to be found in suffering:

And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. (Romans 5:3-5)

We all know and love people who have endured great suffering in life and have come out better and stronger and more loving as a result. [There are a number of them sitting in this room right now but I won't embarrass them by calling their names out loud!] They have passed the test of trials and temptations that we sing about in the hymn "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" (verse 2):

"Have we trials and temptations, is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged, take it to The Lord in prayer. Can we find a friend so faithful, who will all our sorrows, share? Jesus knows our every weakness, take it to The Lord in prayer."

Certainly God journeys with us in life and shares our sorrow along the way. I loved the wisdom of Hunter Pence, right fielder for the San Francisco Giants, who have been terrible the last two months, when he said, "If you are going through hell....keep going...."

But I reject the notion that God's causes our sufferings in life to teach us something, to make us better people. I cringe when I see the bumper sticker, "God doesn't give us more than we can handle!" First of all I don't understand God's sovereignty to suggest that like a master puppeteer God controls each and every moment in our lives....I don't think God causes us to have disease or tragedy or failure. And secondly I know too many good and faithful people who have been overwhelmed in life with sufferings beyond measure, beyond their control.

Absolutely, suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character and character produces hope but it is not God's pedagogy to place temptations and trials before us to see if we pass the test; life is difficult enough as it is to think of God as the one trying to trip us up to make us better people. That is not how it works.

And we know that because of Paul's next verses in our Epistle lesson this morning:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.....God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. (Romans 5:6-9)

God loves us...saves us....before we pass the test, in fact while we are failing the test, while we are weak and sinning God saves us from the "wrath to come", a reference to that moment at the end of time when we stand before the judgment throne. Life is a test, indeed, but we pass not because of our qualifications but because of what God has done for us. That's amazing grace! All we are asked is to live like it.

To put this notion into secular terms, Dr. Brene Brown suggests we live in a culture of scarcity, where we are never good enough, perfect enough, thin enough, successful enough and as such adopt shame as one of our prime orientations in life. The antidote to such scarcity is not an abundance of whatever it is we feel we are lacking but what she calls "wholeheartedness":

Wholehearted living is about engaging in our lives from a place of worthiness. It means cultivating the courage, compassion and connection to wake up in the morning and think *No matter what gets done and how much is left undone, I am enough.* It's going to bed at night thinking, *Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn't change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging.* (Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead, Gotham Books, 2012)

"God proves his love towards us that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us..." That idea transformed the course of Christianity. It is an invitation to "wholehearted living"; to reject the shame we carry and embrace our worth as children of God. It's the "abundant life" (John 10:10) to which Jesus invites us. One convinced of and committed to the divine love and purpose in each of our lives that stands the test of time.

Is life a test? Yes. We pass it when we accept the worthiness that God gives us and teaches us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

When your worth as a person is no longer on the line....even when you have a broken heart...even when you are alone...even when you have blown it again....that's when you know you've passed the test of time.

Amen.