

Nov 14 - John 11 "That's not what love does!?"

1. What are the various ways that we navigate the question - How can there be a good and loving God when there is suffering and evil in the world?

This is more of a reflection question to bring your group to reflect on the mystery of God's love for us. This will help your group as you reflect on the second question.

Theodicy – the vindication of God's love and goodness in the face of evil and suffering the world is from what I understand a fairly new field of thought. Our spiritual ancestors did not struggle with this question the way that we do. Part of the reason I suspect is that our concept of God has shifted over the years.

Here are some examples of ways people navigate this question that may help spark conversation:

- A. *As I mentioned in the sermon much of western Christianity it formed in a theological framework of moralistic therapeutic deism. At it's most basic level this view of God says that it is God's job to keep us happy or at least to keep bad stuff from happening to us. If we aren't happy, or bad stuff is happening to us then either it's our fault and we are being punished for not living moral lives or it is God's fault for not keeping up his end of the bargain. A biblical conception of God however does not have our happiness as the end goal, but rather our holiness, that is our living in the world in step with the patterns of his coming Kingdom.*
- B. *In his popular book **When bad things happen to good people** Rabbi Kushner pits God's goodness against his power. Either God is good and doesn't have the power to deal with the evil in the world or God is able to deal with the problems of the world and because he doesn't he isn't good. Kushner resolves the conflict between power and goodness by favouring God's goodness and says that God can be with us in the suffering but is unable to do anything about it.*
- C. *Another approach is to reflect on the interaction between God's sovereignty and human free will. God has given human beings freewill so all of the suffering and evil in the world can be attributed to human cause. God is not responsible, we are responsible. This explanation then covers a good chunk of the problems in our world but bumps into problems when we encounter what are called "acts of God" – volcanoes, earthquakes, weather events etc.. It also leaves open the question if God is good and loving and powerful and could keep suffering from happening why doesn't he?*

Read John 11

2. (vs. 5-6) The way that John phrases these verses communicates that it is love that motivates Jesus to linger for two more days, allowing Lazarus to die, and not keeping his sisters from grieving. What does this tell us about discerning God's love for us based on our circumstances or our feelings?

It tells us that our circumstances and feelings are not good determinates for discerning the love of God.

The way the story is told it seems to suggest that the glory of God – coming to see the fullness of who Jesus is and why he has come (vs.4) is a greater good than keeping Lazarus from death. That God's primary goal in all things is that we would come to know him more deeply and truly and come to conform to his will and way for the world. Do we see this as a greater good? This may be great fodder for discussion and would be well worth lingering in...

3. Why is it that we desire to know the reasons why God allows something and can't leave it in the realm of mystery?

Sin is the desire to be the gods and goddesses of our own lives. In sin we believe that we are owed an explanation for why God would allow, or cause, or direct that satisfies our understanding of what is best for us and for our world.

Faith is a living trust in God. When there is trust in the goodness and love of God for us we can then more easily leave things in the realm of mystery. In that trust we may conclude that there may be 1001 reasons why God causes, or allows, or directs, reasons that are likely far beyond our comprehension but none of them will be because he doesn't love us, none of them will be because he doesn't care.

4. What is the expression of Jesus' love toward Martha and Mary?

His love of Martha is expressed by inviting her to apprehend hope-filled truth. He invites her to expand the horizons of her hope. To grab a hold of a hope that is far greater than the dead being raised on the last day. A hope that says that in and through Jesus all that is wrong will be righted, all that is undone will be remade, all the tears that have been shed will be wiped away, all pain, suffering and sorrow will be redeemed, everything will be far better than she can possibly imagine.

He also invites her to bring her future hope into the present. For he is offering her eternal life, a life that cannot be extinguished even by death itself. A life that is found in him. For when his Spirit enters our spirit we will be changed from one degree of splendor to another until we come to that point of physical death and are ushered into his presence and are shot through with his power, love, joy and goodness.

His love of Mary is expressed as tears. He enters in. He is fully present with her in her suffering. He weeps as she weeps, grieves and she grieves, sorrows as she sorrows. This is one of the beautiful implication of the incarnation, that God has taken on flesh and become one of us in Jesus. He is then with us in all that we have gone through or will go through.

5. As followers of Jesus we are called to this same ministry of love with one another and with our neighbours. A love of both truth and tears. By temperament we will often lean one way or the other. Which way do you lean by temperament? How would you hope that Jesus would shape you to express his ministry of love toward others in a balanced and wise way?

This is simply a personal reflection question that invites application from this text. To help bring others into the conversation with honesty and vulnerability spend some time ahead of the study reflecting on this question yourself to set the tone of the resulting conversation.

It will be helpful I would think to reflect on the impact of giving truth when tears are needed or giving tears when truth is needed. We need from Jesus the wisdom to know what is needed with whom and when.

This question would be great to inform your prayers for one another at the close of your study. Pray for one another around how you would like Jesus to shape his love in you for others.

6. (vs. 38) The Greek word used to express Jesus' emotional state when he approaches the tomb is not one of tears but of anger and rage. It was used of a horse snorting in rage before it entered into battle. What is Jesus angry at? How does this inform your perspective of who Jesus is?

Jesus is not angry at the mourners for their lack of faith, nor is he angry at himself for coming late, he is angry at death which is the result of our sin and rebellion. Angry at what is destroying his creation. Angry at what God never intended.

We often see anger as incompatible with love. But true love will be expressed in anger at what is destroying the beloved. For example when a parent is seeing their child being destroyed by their mishandling of truth – that parent will be angry at their lying not in spite of their love but because of it.

7. Jesus' rage at death that calls Lazarus from the tomb precipitates the religious leaders plotting his demise that leads him to the cross. How does this express to us the magnitude of his love for us?

Jesus dies our death upon a cross that death might be defeated.

Jesus bears our sin upon a cross that our sins might be forgiven.

Jesus takes the full consequences of our sin so that we might be adopted as children of God and made heirs of his future eternal kingdom.

I think the scandal of God dying for us has become such a familiar truth that it doesn't move and inspire us the way that it should – perhaps spend some time trying to invite your group to encounter the scandal of it again would be helpful.