

Some things have happened in the last 10 days that have been the catalyst for my words for this morning. You already have heard about the first thing. On the last day of our Annual Conference, one of our most beloved retired pastors, Valerie Stultz collapsed with an aneurysm in her brain. She was taken to Toledo to their best hospital, but she did not survive during the trip there. Her memorial service was down in Delaware, Ohio at Ohio Wesleyan where she had been a student and met her husband, and where they were living in retirement. I wish I could have been there. I wish I could have heard the words that were said in her honor and memory. BTW, for big Ohio State football fans, Valerie's son Dan held the scoring record for Ohio State as the kicker there who graduated in 2000. He no longer holds the record. But still, it is a small world. Well, then something else happened.

My brother Duane the engineer from Georgia called me mid-day on Monday. He told me with a heavy heart that he had to go do something that he was dreading. He had to go to calling hours for one of his technicians at the tire plant. It was not for the technician, but for his 4-year old son who had somehow made his way into their swimming pool with no one else around. My brother, who is a very confident and competent engineer, usually does not ask for advice on anything. But he was asking on Monday. ***What do I say? Should I not say anything? What should I do?*** He was really bothered by not knowing what the right answer or response was supposed to be. I will talk to him soon and find out how things went.

Well, then another situation arose on Thursday. I was minding my own business getting my hair cut by a woman who has cut my hair for 20 years! We are friends who have talked about a lot of things in 20 years. But she told me that her best friend's Mom was in her last days of battling cancer, and she was going to visit this Mom the next day. But, she told me that it had been made very clear to her by her friend, and the friend's Dad that there was to be no mention of the situation they were facing. There was to be no good-bye, there were to be no tears, she was to act just act like nothing was happening at all! She asked me for advice as well. I will share that advice in a moment.

Let me have us pause right now, and come to a full stop. In the face of these 3 situations, one thing seems very clear to me: Life calls out for explanations, especially at times when there is great loss. When peoples' lives are ending or have ended, people want to know what to think. They want to know what it all means. Let me interject here that I believe that this is a golden opportunity here for disciples of Jesus Christ to be of great service to the society around us. Are bad things still going to happen to people in days to come? Absolutely. But as our society becomes even more secular and distant from God, will there not still be a great need for somebody to share some thoughts with others when they are in one of those painful situations? I think this is a great opportunity for people like us to minister to a hurting world around us that does not know what to think or which way to turn.

For 30 years now, when I do funerals, I often say a little prayer in the service that goes like this: **Holy God, whose ways are not our ways and whose thoughts are not our thoughts, grant that your Holy Spirit may intercede for us with sighs too deep for human words. Heal our wounded hearts made heavy by our sorrow.** There is more to the prayer. I have had the chance to say these words hundreds of times. And especially now I am gripped by them like never before. I think they are very wise. We could learn at least two key things from this: 1, God's ways are **not** our ways, God's thoughts are **not** our thoughts. And 2, the power of God has the ability to speak to our broken hearts with something that is far deeper than our flimsy human words. St. Paul talks about this in Romans, that God's Spirit will speak to us in groans or sighs too deep for human words. But God we will speak, and we will be blessed by those sounds.

I don't imagine that *a certain thing* was said on Tuesday at Valerie's service in Delaware, Ohio. I don't imagine that anyone was in the pulpit saying "Well, this was all just a part of God's plan, so we should be happy that God has done exactly what God always does!" No one said that. But at the little boy's service in North-West Georgia last week, I just wonder if someone stood up and told everyone to smile, that this was not a problem, and that it was all just a part of a great plan that we don't understand. My brother was actually dreading that someone was going to be saying things like that. ***God needed a little helper to hang around with.*** I fear that something like

that was said because that is the dominant kind of religion in that area. Saying that, I need us to see a poster which I had in my church 30 years ago. I loved it then, and I still love it now. **The Only problem with religions that have all the answers is that they don't allow questions.** This is one of the great problems we face! I believe there are 2, and it is like they are two sides of the same coin. I will try to explain this.

It seems to me that when something terrible happens people will either do one of two things. Option A is to say *“Hey, this is all a part of God's secret plan, and we cannot worry about it, and we should be happy that God's plan has done exactly what God intended it to do.”* I hate that thinking. As the people in Alcoholics Anonymous would say, it's stinkin' thinkin'! Option A actually functions because some people believe and insist that there are always answers for why things happen. Always! Some people believe that there is always an answer. Just like the guy on the poster, if you are going to believe this, you cannot ask any questions. I would like to believe that God gave us our minds with hopes that we would ask a lot of questions.

So, Option A is “Everything is great because it is all God's Will.” Option B is this: Pretend that nothing is going wrong! A person's mother has terrible lung cancer that has spread everywhere in her body. People can visit. But they cannot cry, they cannot say good-bye, they cannot act like anything is wrong, because it is all just going to be fine. It is not really happening. I suggested to my friend that she hug her friend's Mom and thank

her for all the times she took care of them and for all the good times that they had together. I told her that she should say good-bye and calmly tell her that she hopes they would see each other again. It's okay to cry and hug. In fact it's probably the best thing. Let people know you love them and that you will always love them.

I shared with my brother that I hoped he could quietly tell this Dad whose 4-year old boy was gone that he should not believe that this was all a part of some plan, and that there was certainly some answer to this pain. I suggested that he tell the man that God's heart is broken too, and that this is a terrible loss. My brother agreed but didn't know if he would risk saying it. Why not? Things are going to happen in life. Tragedies are always going to come. They just are. And some things cannot be explained away. In those cases maybe we should trust that just being with someone will be the best thing. We should not try to offer an answer, but just suggest that God is Love, and that God loves all of us.

Our passage today comes from a very special context. Ancient Judah had been destroyed, along with Solomon's Temple. Leaders had been taken to Babylon for 80 years, there they died. Isaiah 55 seems to have been written to comfort these people after their world was shattered. That ancient piece of a poem tells us that God's thoughts and ways are not our ways, that they are higher than our thoughts and ways. But then the poem says *“For as the rain and the snow come down from the sky, and do not return there until they have watered*

*the earth...so shall my word which goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”*

Yes, God has plans and intentions; but they are high above us. They shall not return empty. But that doesn't mean that we can explain them. So Option A seems to be a mistaken idea. We cannot speak for God. We can believe that God loves us, because Jesus told us so. It is my great hope that our faith and understanding can grow and mature so that we can be helpful to others who have big questions. The big questions are not going to go away. I would love to imagine the people of our church being able to offer some calm kindness to others when they are desperate for answers. I would love to imagine us NEVER acting like we have all the answers, or that we speak for God. And I hope that we'll realize that sometimes in times of trouble the best thing is just to be with someone. It is not our job to explain the mysteries of life. Let's just be with those who are hurting and trust that God will find a way to speak to their hearts with sighs too deep for human words. In the name of the LORD our God, and his Son Jesus Christ. AMEN.