

Providence and Permissions
or
What Kind of Order includes Misery?

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, May 6th, 2012

Though not among our lessons today, our leading thought is taken from Luke 13, where we read,

“There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.’” (Luke 13:1-5)

If you cut yourself you will bleed. Is that orderly?

If you jump from a high ledge with no restraints you will fall. Is that orderly?

If you eat poison mushrooms or use crack cocaine you will suffer. Is that orderly?

Here’s the thing. True order is not about getting what you want. It is about things being organized in such a way that they work. To some extent it is about predictability – assuming you have the knowledge or insight to understand how things work.

How weird would it be if you cut yourself and you didn’t bleed? - or if you jumped off a ledge and didn’t fall? The fact that actions have at the very least *reliable consequences* is one of the greatest blessings of life in this world. Without this you would never know what to expect and you would not be able to take any real responsibility for anything that happens. In fact you would be robbed of your freedom and your life would be void of any meaning. You would probably just curl up into a ball and go nuts.

Sounds fair enough, doesn’t it? But what about things that aren’t your fault? What if someone *else* cuts you, or someone *pushes* you off that ledge? What if you eat a poison mushroom not knowing it is poison, or use crack cocaine thinking you can handle it? Do these conditions preempt the rule of natural laws? No. ***Are they orderly?*** Well, now, let’s think about that.

In the text from Luke the Lord cited two examples of people who suffered through no fault of their own, *but He went on to say that unless they (His listeners) repented “they would all likewise perish.”* How does this add up?

The simple answer is that the word, repent, comes from the Greek meaning to change one’s mind or behavior. In fact it’s a very interesting word that also has implications of seeing more deeply or comprehensively as part of the change. So on a purely material level we might say that the

Lord was telling them, unless they smartened up they would also suffer. In other words, knowledge is important, what you don't know CAN hurt you, and what you DO know can save you – because every action has a predictable “orderly” consequence. But really, the Lord said these things not so much as natural lessons but as illustrations of the laws that govern our *spiritual* lives. We can perish naturally or we can perish spiritually, and the Lord was clearly warning people that if they didn't repent spiritually they would suffer spiritually, more justly than those *innocent* victims perished naturally. Indeed, we may *think* “ignorance is bliss” and that we won't be held spiritually responsible for what we don't know, but that is not true when we know that there is life-saving information available and we reject the opportunity to learn and use it.

So although pushing someone off a ledge is not “orderly,” still there is a predictable order to the consequences of that action, and what's more important, it is within the scope of Divine Providence that you can make a decision to push someone, or even do so inadvertently. For as awful as many human actions are, the implications of our actions having no consequences, or unpredictable consequences, are much, much worse – naturally, psychologically and spiritually. The whole point of life is that we develop a healthy sense of individual identity, of life as if it were our own, so that we can find meaning and purpose in our existence, enjoy a sense of freedom in choosing how to respond to the purpose, feeling useful and responsible in the process.

You all know how discouraging it is to feel useless, or that your life simply doesn't matter.

But as long as we have freedom (whether mental or physical) and the realistic hope of some accomplishment, as long as we feel our lives have meaning and that our actions have consequences, we can enjoy our part in the grand scheme of Providence – despite our hardships – and we can be prepared for eternal life in heaven.

On the other hand, the hardships, the messiness, the miseries and tragedies of life can't just be ignored. They are real, they can be painful, and they *seem* to suggest a lack of attention or concern by God – whose very existence we may begin to doubt, or to whom we may attribute some sort of vengefulness or arbitrariness that causes our suffering. In this connection it's important to realize that the order, the framework, the design of creation includes a wide range of degrees of perfection. Only the Infinite is absolutely good and true; anything less can only represent or approximate His incredible love and wisdom.

So we have the sensible, reliable teaching of the heavenly doctrines that all order proceeds from God by degrees, just as light and heat proceed from the sun by degrees, gradually diminishing through space and time as object are farther and farther removed from the source. The way this works, as most of you know, is that the love and wisdom of God proceed from Him in a completely unified way, His wisdom or truth being the very form of His love. At the highest levels (those nearest to Him) people receive this love and wisdom with complete integrity and fulness according to His WILL. But as we begin to remove ourselves to any degree – for whatever reasons – from Him, then although the truth of His wisdom continues to provide forms of order for us the warmth of His love begins to diminish. So we have a level of Providence called the Lord's “good pleasure.” At this level we are still co-operating very well with the Lord but there's an element of self-interest in it that takes away from the purity of His love. We do the right things, but we don't always do them from pure motives. Something of innocence is lost. Therefore the Lord cannot bless us quite as fully as He can under the guidance of His will.

And then if we are removed – again, for whatever reason – a little further from the sphere of His love we come under the rule of His “leave” or consent. In this case we begin to doubt or object to the Lord’s love and wisdom, perhaps insisting on our own ideas and doing what seems good to us rather than innocently trusting His will. We have trouble understanding what the Lord means in His Word or what He wants of us and so we begin to make mistakes, fighting against the flow of Providence. At this level or degree of separation from the Lord we start experiencing real problems; but there’s nothing wrong with HIS arrangement of things, the problems are just symptoms or effects of our conflicts with it. And let’s be clear, the symptoms are not given as punishments, rather they are simply the results of our bucking the system, and they are merciful reminders that we need to get back on track – or perhaps help others to do so.

We can illustrate this process by considering the headache we might get from an injury, an improper diet, sun stroke, stress or disease. WHY do we have this headache? Surely not because the Lord is angry with us or doesn’t care; He is still providing for us out of pure love and mercy, in fact He grants the headache to warn us that we need to get treatment or make some change.

Finally, according to the laws of order there is a level of reception called permission. Now this is interesting. As the word implies, the things we think or do at this level are neither willed nor pleasing to the Lord, nor does He consent to them as one who agrees that they are acceptable, but they are permitted with all their miserable implications because not permitting them would be even worse in that it would take away our freedom, our responsibility and in fact our whole sense of identity. So the Lord’s purpose in creation would be denied and no one having entered into any falsity or evil could ever be reformed.

On the other hand, when evils are permitted they can be seen for what they are and the consequences also can be seen so that we are motivated to change.

But note, as merciful as they are, the teachings about the laws of permission are not intended to relieve our consciences in planning ahead. They are given to help us understand why bad things happen either to us or to others even though the Lord is still in control. If we use them as excuses or self-justification to do something we know very well is wrong then we are no better than any old hypocrite, taking the Lord’s name in vain. There is no such thing as “a permission” in the sense that it is authorized ahead of time. Rather, looking back or looking at the lives of others compassionately, we can sometimes see why the Lord permitted something to happen, so that some good might come out of it.

In fact, the laws of order at the level of permission are all under the authority of truth almost completely separated from good and so they tend to hurt or condemn – at least until some correction is made, whereas the laws of order at the levels of will or good pleasure are full of love and compassion – all the more reason to stay on the straight and narrow path.

Which brings up another issue in the discussion about order, and that is the difference between Divine Providence and Foresight. We read,

“The nature of the Lord's Providence is such that it is linked together with Foresight; the one does not exist without the other. *For evil things are foreseen, but good ones are provided;* and the evil things that are foreseen are constantly being

turned towards what is good by means of the Lord's provident arrangement, *since the Divine end, which has good in view, governs everything. **Nothing is therefore allowed to happen except to the end that something good may come out of it.*** But because a person possesses freedom that enables him to be reformed, he is turned from evil towards good so far as he freely allows himself to be turned. (And) he is constantly being turned from an utterly dreadful hell, into which he makes every effort to cast himself, to one that is not so bad, if he cannot be led to heaven" (AC 6489).

This of course brings to mind almost any miracle of healing that the Lord performed while in the world, taking disability (or even death) and turning it to the good of faith in Him and all His loving wisdom. Of course at that time, and for reasons all related to eternal life, the Lord healed people of their physical maladies and brought them back to natural life. This also was reflected in the story of Joseph, especially when he revealed his identity to his brothers in Egypt, saying,

"I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. But now, do not therefore be grieved nor angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.... And God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now it was not you who sent me here, but God..." (Gen. 45:4-8).

But in reading these and many other things in the Word about natural healing and the preservation of natural life it is absolutely critical to remember that they are all written primarily as metaphors and representatives of spiritual life. As the Lord Himself said – in a tremendous variety of ways, "...What is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Matt. 16:26).

The key to understanding order and Providence, and therefore also Divine foresight including anything unfortunate that is permitted, is to see it all in the light of eternal life. In this light, we read, "those who trust in the Divine... Though concerned about the morrow, yet are they unconcerned, in that they are not anxious, let alone worried, when they give thought to the morrow. They remain even-tempered whether or not they realize desires, and they do not grieve over loss; they are content with their lot. If they become wealthy they do not become infatuated with wealth; if they are promoted to important positions they do not consider themselves worthier than others. If they become poor they are not made miserable either; if lowly in status they do not feel downcast. They know that for those who trust in the Divine all things are moving towards an everlasting state of happiness, and that no matter what happens at any time to them, it contributes to that state" (AC 8478:3).

Admittedly, this is not our natural state. We have to grow into it. But when we do, and so when we get into the stream of Providence and stop fighting against it we really are "carried along toward everything that is happy, whatever may be the appearance of the means" (AC 8478:4).

Amen.

Lessons: Mark 2:1-12, with a children's talk on turning evil to good.
Genesis 45:1-15 and Arcana Caelestia #2443 & 2447:1-4