One of the half-truths that I have heard many times is this: “Everything happens for a reason.” Many of us have said and many of us have believed this, but it is a half-truth. In the midst of some tragedy that has touched your life or the life of a close friend, or a relative, have you ever heard someone say: “So sorry to hear about what happened. It must have been God’s will. Everything happens for a reason. It’s all part of God’s plan.”

Often these words are meant well and the person saying them is trying to provide some kind of reminder of God’s presence in our lives. Unfortunately, these words provide no comfort and can actually do great harm to one’s soul. And, as Christian people, it does our witness of Christian faith no good when we paint God as a celestial bully who would willfully take someone’s child from them or give someone cancer. Listen! Here is the crux of what needs to be said in this homily today: God is not in the business of willfully causing pain in order to prove a point or to make some kind of chain of events occur. But this is not to say that God can’t or doesn’t redeem a bad thing for a good purpose. In Romans 8 verse 28 we read that in everything God works for good.

When we use the logic that everything that happens is because God orchestrated it or that God has some purpose, we can then make an argument that everything is God’s will. When we say that everything that happens is God’s will, we absolve ourselves of the personal responsibility we have for our actions. If we simply chalk every event up to being God’s will or God having a divine purpose for making these things happen, it means we have no responsibility. For example, it would mean parents who abuse their children aren’t actually doing anything wrong because they are just acting according to God’s will. It would mean that the shooter at Fort Lauderdale airport last week was merely an instrument of God used to continue God’s plan.

Paul wrote the Letter to the Romans while facing a trial in front of the emperor of Rome. Paul was no stranger to conflict, in fact, his ministry was marked with conflict time and time
again. It was in the midst of one of these conflicts that Paul pens this letter in which he states that in everything God works for the good of God’s own Self and the good of God’s people. I want you please to note what Paul did not say: the apostle did not say that God has arranged everything according to God’s will. Paul did not say that God caused him to be put in chains and put on trial to face death. Paul did not say that God made him go to prison. Instead, Paul says that God works it all out in the end. This is an important difference to take note of because Paul is not placing the blame on God for his being under arrest, but rather acknowledging that God will use it. To say it another way, God doesn’t cause innocent people to go to jail, God doesn’t cause people to die of cancer, and God does not cause people to be killed in senseless tragedies. But when these things do happen, God makes the evil thing bring about good for the Kingdom of God.

A prominent figure during the Protestant Reformation during the 16th Century, John Calvin, proposed that God had planned every single thing that would ever happen, including the fact that you’re here today at LUMC. It’s a theological notion called theological determinism. Calvin also believed in a principle called predestination, which meant that not only did God know everything that would happen in history but that God actually planned everything. Predestination, in Calvin’s view, means that God has picked and chosen who will go to heaven and who will go to hell.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, disagreed with Calvin in this major area of Predestination. Wesley believed that from the very beginning humankind was given free will, or the ability to make our own choices. As a result, United Methodist belief is that we decide for ourselves to trust Christ ...that God gives us prevenient grace, or grace which comes before, which God uses to reach out to us humans and enable us to say “yes” to God’s saving and sanctifying grace. Wesley believed that we have free will instead of having our will dictated to us.

It may be comforting to believe that everything happens for a reason, especially when bad things happen, that it’s all for a greater purpose, but that’s simply not true. Bad things happen for a variety of reasons, but sometimes they just happen. They do not happen because God willed it or because God wanted to prove a point. God does not give people cancer. God does not cause children to die. God does not cause any sort of tragedy. But when tragedy does
strike, let us remember that God is in the midst of it and God is ready to take that evil, ugly thing and make something beautiful out of it.

   In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.