

**3 Lent
March 20, 2022**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

For many years, Caren and I consulted with churches in conflict. Many of them were Episcopal churches, but we also consulted with a broad range of other denominations ... Lutheran, Presbyterian, Disciples of Christ, and others. We would meet with the leadership, interview members of the congregation, lead workshops, and present a report.

Unlike other forms of conflict transformation we did not attribute blame for the origin of the conflict, but rather offered a plan for the congregation to move forward out of the conflict. Part of our role as consultants was to be a non-anxious presence in the face of the anxiety the congregation was experiencing ... and to teach them how to be non-anxious presence as well.

One of the first questions we would ask the leadership of the congregation was, "What is the issue that has caused this conflict in your church?" We would usually get a long list of complaints ... the pastor, the sermons, the music, the way money was spent, and more. We would mine that question for a while, and then Caren would ask, "What is the real issue?" Most of the time there was a silent pause, then someone would mention a few strong voices of dissent in the congregation, or that there was a lot of gossip spread by a small group, or something to that effect. After exploring that question, Caren would then ask, "What's really the issue?"

On one occasion, we were consulting with a Methodist church in Ohio that was experiencing conflict in their staff dynamics. We spent two hours with the staff looking at what the "issues" were, and what they saw as the "real issues." We then took a break. When we came back together, Caren asked, "What's really the issue?" The rather large staff looked at Caren, then began looking at each other searching for an answer. Finally, the Sunday School Director stood up and angrily threw some papers on the table and said, "I am. I am the issue. I don't like any of you, and none of you like me. You know it, and I know it. I quit." She walked out of the room.

The room was silent. Then the pastor, trying to lighten up the situation said, "Well, I guess our consultants have done their job. It looks like we can get back to work." Caren responded, "Your work has just begun. You still have a lot in front of you." The question, "What's really the issue?" wasn't resolved by the Sunday School Director quitting and walking out. There was still the larger issue of the workplace environment that allowed this to happen in the first place.

In our reading from Luke's Gospel this morning, some folks come to Jesus with headline news of horror and tragedy. Pontius Pilate has slaughtered a group of Galilean Jews, and then he

mingled their blood with the blood of sacrificial lambs as an insult to the religious practices of the Jews. Meanwhile, the tower of Siloam had collapsed, crushing and killing eighteen people. Those who told Jesus about these events accompany the brutal accounts with the question we know all too well ... Why? Why did these terrible things happen? Why is there so much pain in the world? Why does a good God allow human suffering? Why do bad things happen to good people?

Jesus' response to their questions? What's really the issue?

For thousands of years, questions of why a God of goodness and love allows evil in the world have plagued our faith. And for thousands of years, we have failed to find answers that satisfy us. Yet we can't stop asking the questions. We still crave a Theory of Everything when bad stuff happens. We still look for formulas to eradicate mystery, and make sense of the senseless.

As Luke's Gospel makes clear, the people who ask Jesus their versions of the "Why do bad things happen to good people" question already have an answer in mind. They don't approach Jesus with a blank slate ... they come expecting Jesus to verify their deeply held belief that people suffer because they're sinful ... that folks get what they deserve ... that bad things happen to bad people. If something "bad" has happened to you, then you must be a "bad" person ... even if we don't why. To explain the tragedy away, we blame the victim.

It's tempting for us to look at such "ancient" beliefs and feel smugly superior in comparison. But how different, really, are the beliefs we hold about human suffering? When the unspeakable happens, what default settings do we revert to? We say things like, "Nothing happens outside of God's plan." "God is growing your character through this tragedy." "Don't worry, the Lord never gives anyone more than they can bear." "Nothing is ever lost." "Buck up ... other people have it worse."

The problem with every one of those answers is that they hold us apart from those who suffer. They keep us from embracing our common lot ... our common brokenness ... our common humanity. When Jesus challenges his listeners' assumptions and tells them to "repent" before it's too late, I think part of what he's saying is this ... any question that allows us to keep a sanitized distance from the mystery and reality of another person's pain is a question we need to re-ask at another level. "What's really the issue?," Jesus says to the folks who bring him the painful news about Pilate and Siloam. "What's really the issue?," he says to us when we batter God with "why" instead of offering God our hands and feet, our hearts and souls. "What's really the issue?," he insists when we wax eloquent about other people's suffering, but do nothing to alleviate it.

Jesus tells us that we are asking the wrong questions. You're mired in irrelevance. You're losing your life in your effort to save it. Start over again. Ask a better question. Go deeper, be braver, draw closer. Repent. Which means, change your mind. Turn around. Head in a different direction.

But what is the better question? If asking “Why do bad things happen to good people?” won’t get us anywhere, what kind of question will? What is really the issue?

As is so often the case, Jesus addresses the problem with a story. Instead of giving some intellectual, PhD dissertation answer he tells a story about ... of all things ... a fig tree.

A landowner has a fig tree planted in his vineyard, Jesus tells his listeners. One day, the landowner goes looking for fruit on the tree, and finds none. Incensed, he confronts his gardener: “For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree,” he says, “and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it waste the soil?” But the gardener begs his employer for more time: “Sir, let the tree alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, then you can cut it down.”

What an odd story to tell at such a moment! What on earth does a fruitless fig tree have to do with Pilate’s horrendous killing spree, or with the massive structural failure that toppled the tower of Siloam? Or, in our own time, the killing of innocent people in Ukraine by an evil tyrant? What is Jesus saying?

To begin with, Jesus is saying, “Engage in story rather than platitude.” Platitudes are flat ... formulas are reductive ... theories don’t heal. And questions that call for shallow answers aren’t worth asking in the face of tragedy. But stories? Stories open up possibility. Stories include, unmake, and transform us. Why did those Galilean Jews die? Why did the tower fall? Okay, sit down, let me tell you about a fig tree...

Notice that there are three, maybe four, characters in this story ... the absentee landowner, the gardener, the fig tree, and the soil in which the fig tree is planted. The landowner sees the fig tree as the problem ... so cut it down ... get rid of the problem.

The gardener, on the other hand, looks at the fig tree as an innocent victim ... remember this is a metaphor ... and the gardener offers compassion. The fig tree may be a “bad” fig tree ... that is unable to produce figs. Or, it may be a “good” fig tree ... very able to produce figs if given the right environment. So, the gardener has compassion on the innocent victim, and is willing to spend the time and effort to change the environment by adding manure and cultivation ... nourishment and attention ... with a hope that it will produce figs.

By Jesus answering the question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” with a parable, he is essentially saying, “What difference does it make? Stop asking that question, and start looking at what you can do to change the situation.” I know from personal experience that when I am comforting someone who has faced a tragedy, trying to explain “why” does not bring comfort ... but compassion and presence can.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus doesn’t tell his listeners what to believe, but rather how to act, and what to do. Three hundred years later, at the Council of Nicea, the Church formed in

his name, gives us a creed that tells us what to believe, but says nothing about how we should act.

In response to hearing about Pilate and the tower of Silaom, Jesus uses the word “repent” before he tells his parable. Most people associate this word with the word “sin,” as in “repenting of sins.” The word “repent” comes from the Greek word “metanoia,” which really is about a transformative change of heart. By responding to the questions with a parable ... this particular parable ... Jesus is telling the listener to change their heart from judgement to compassion ... move away from asking about “why” to the question “what can I do to help?”

If that is the case, in what ways am I like the absentee landowner, standing apart from where life and death actually happen? How am I refusing to get my hands dirty? ... wallowing in futility and despair? ... pronouncing judgments I have no right to pronounce? How am I prone to look for waste, loss, and scarcity in the world ... rather than looking for potential and possibility? Where in my life ... or in the lives of others ... have I prematurely called it quits, saying, “There’s no life here worth cultivating. Cut it down.”

In what ways am I like the fig tree? Un-enlivened? ... un-nourished? ... unable or unwilling to nourish others? In what ways do I feel helpless or hopeless? ... ignored or dismissed? What kinds of tending and sustenance would it take to bring me back to life? Am I willing to receive such intimate, consequential care? Will I consent to change? Might I dare to flourish in a world where I have thus far been invisible? Have I become complacent when it comes to transformation and change in my life, assuming that I have limitless time to become fruitful

Finally, in what ways am I like the gardener? If I am to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, where in my life am I willing to accept the invitation to go elbow-deep into the muck and manure? Where do I see life where others see death? How willing am I to pour hope into a project I can't control? Am I brave enough to sacrifice time, effort, love, and hope into this tree ... this relationship ... this cause ... this tragedy ... this injustice ... with no guarantee of a fruitful outcome?

Jesus says “Why do bad things happen to good people” is not a life-giving question. Why hasn’t the fig tree produced fruit yet? Well, here’s the manure, and here’s a shovel ... get to work. Why do terrible, painful, completely unfair things happen in this world? Um, go weep with someone who’s weeping. Go fight for the justice you long to see. Go confront evil where it needs confronting. Go learn the art of patient, hope-filled tending. Go cultivate beautiful things.

What is the issue? What is the real issue? What is really the issue? Now, what are you going to do about it that will transform who you are ... and transform the world around you?

In short ... imagine a deeper story ... ask a better question ... live a better answer. Time is running short. The season to bear fruit has come. Quit looking to place blame and start picking

up the pieces for a new tomorrow. Repent ... allow your heart to be transformed. Remember, you were made in goodness, for goodness. Get to work sharing that goodness.

Amen.