

As toddlers learn to talk and engage with the world, the first question asked is “why?” and often it is asked incessantly. Some parents hope that an explanation can be offered without the child asking a follow up “why?” Eventually there will be a “why” question for which there is no answer. The exasperated parent may then say, “because I said so, that’s why!” It is a response that I vowed never to say to my own children and I have only been able to keep this vow because I have no children! Some why questions just don’t have a satisfactory answer.

As we grow older, the desire to ask “why?” never really goes away, we just learn more appropriate circumstances in which to ask the question. Scientific inquiry gets nowhere without asking “why.” Criminal investigations and mystery writers alike need to ask “why” so that they can determine a motive for a crime. We want to know “why” so that we can make sense of the senseless. To the extent that we are not

numb with mass shooting after mass shooting, knowing “why” the shootings occurred in Kansas and Kalamazoo might help us examine our own sense of security, to reassure ourselves that it won’t happen to us. The reality, however, is that such events are random, unpredictable and unknowable in determining “why.”

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is squarely facing the “why” question in the face of two tragedies that must have been current events in the first century Jewish community. Some of his followers tell him of the brutal murder of faithful Jews in the Temple by the Empire and Jesus recounts 18 deaths due to a tragic building collapse. Understood by his listeners that the answer to the “why” question was because somehow they deserved this fate. Jesus fully rejects this as the reason.

His conversation partners come by their understanding honestly. The Book of Deuteronomy contains within it the prominence of moral and ethical matters. In this vein is the idea

that God rewards those who obeys His commandments and punishes those who do not. This idea is further expressed as “blessings and curses.” Consequently, good things happen to people who are faithful to God and bad things happen to people who richly deserve bad things. Our idiom of “what goes ‘round, comes ‘round” captures this idea perfectly. And Jesus utterly rejects this.

In the words of the popular bumper sticker, Jesus is saying “stuff happens.” Bad things will happen to good people. Random, senseless events can only be attributed to being in the wrong place at the wrong time. There is no fault involved. The affected individuals are no better or any worse than anyone else.

In light of that, Jesus is saying, the best way to prepare for the unknowable, unforeseen event is to be in the best possible relationship with God. Most things are outside of our control. Asking “why?” is a fruitless exercise. More fruitful is

in what we *can* do, which is to simply put our best foot forward in faith and leave the rest up to God.

This ought to be a relief to us. We are not in control of outcomes, God is. We do the best we can to prepare for a future we were never meant to control. As you know, our parish leadership is doing precisely that as we try to walk with St. George's in building up the body of Christ. Whether we actually succeed – or even if we stunningly fail – is an outcome in God's hand.

Our job is simply to be a witness and to wait.<sup>1</sup> Being a witness is not solely a passive activity. In being a witness we are called to love God and to love our neighbor. In many ways, our best witness as Christians is in our activities and our behavior.

Which brings me to the second portion of our Gospel passage with Jesus's parable of the unproductive fruit tree. There is a great deal we can take from this parable. For

example, the tree “deserves” to be cut down, yet the landowner extends mercy for another year, allowing the gardener to equip the tree with those things necessary to bear fruit. This includes stirring up the ground and placing manure around the roots. It has always fascinated me that a waste product is an agent of growth!

Jesus wants us to understand that we are the tree; that God’s mercy and forbearance is beyond reason and that we are given every opportunity to bear fruit for God’s kingdom. To apply the analogy to us, however imperfectly and simplistically, what must we stir up and dig up in order to be witnesses to God’s Kingdom? What secrets need to be exposed to the light of day so that we may orient ourselves in a better way to living into God’s Kingdom? What do we see as “waste product” that will enable us to grow, not just in numbers but also in faith and in relationship to one another? How might we see with new eyes? How might we be as a community in a different way?

At the time Jesus was having this exchange with his followers, Jesus' message was urgent. He expected God's judgment at any moment, knowing that if the people repented, saw the world with fresh eyes, and were really living into loving God and loving neighbor, then God's mercy would continue. Turn your hearts and minds to God NOW, for your own sakes, because you do not and cannot know what the future holds. Then, as now, Jesus expects us to respond. During this season of Lent, may we respond and turn toward God whole heartedly.

AMEN.

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<sup>i</sup> Michael B. Curry, "Homiletical Perspective," *Feast on the Word Year C Vol 2*, (Westminster John Knox: Louisville, KY) 2009, 97.