

The Third Sunday in Lent + March 24, 2019

Jesus resists giving people easy answers. Many times, when someone asks him a question, Jesus will respond with another question, and Jesus reveals the things of God through parables – stories that do not just mean one thing but are layered with meaning and imagination and often lack neat resolution. Getting answers certainly helps us to solve puzzles but Jesus invites us into something deeper - to live the questions of faith and to dwell deeply in mystery of God.

Still, Jesus is not remiss in providing a clear answer from time to time ...

Like the time the Roman Governor Pilate had some Galileans killed in the temple and mixed their blood with the blood of animal sacrifices. It was horrible. Beyond the simple fact that Pilate had this done, it led people to speculate on bigger reasons. Did this mean that those who were killed in this way were worse sinners than others? Jesus answers unequivocally, “no.”

What about the eighteen people who were killed when the Tower of Siloam fell. What did they do to deserve this? Was this some sort of punishment from God because they didn't live right? Jesus' answer is rather emphatic – “no!”

Or what about the cyclone that hit Mozambique last week and the subsequent flooding where it is believed that over 1,000 people have lost their lives? Why them? Does this mean they were bad people? No.

And what of the brazen killings in the Netherlands this past week and at the mosque in New Zealand over a week ago? Did they have it coming? No, I tell you. No.

We join Jesus in offering a firm rebuke to the pat answer or the easy solution. God is not responsible for taking life away. You see, having met God in Jesus, we have seen the fullness of love. God is no bully or puppet master but the source and author of love. Still, beyond the obvious reasons we seek cosmic answers. It's a natural thing to do in the face of tragedy or suffering. We ask reasons when the world seems unreasonable.

About a decade ago I had a bit of an existential crisis that lasted, off and on, for four or five years. It began when a dear friend died because cancer ravaged his body. He lived only a few months between the diagnosis and his death. A few years later, another friend died tragically of a brain tumor. Those close to me heard my cry and so did God. God got quite an earful. At Todd's death I recall weeping bitterly and melting into the arms of my wife, crying “I don't understand.” And when Eric died I protested bitterly, “This is not fair!”

I supposed part of my angst came from the fact that these two guys were my age. I began to wonder why life was cut short for two people who had so much to give. I never got a clear answer, but I think I received something better -- a lot of listening and a lot of love from those closest to me. And through it all I was reassured that God will always hear the cries and groans of God's people; and even if I did get an answer borne of speculation, it would not change the circumstances at all.

And of course, my friends didn't deserve these untimely deaths. This isn't how God operates. I knew that, but I had to hear it again.

One of Thornton Wilder's earliest novels was *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. It's about the death of six people when a rope bridge collapses in Peru. The priest who witnesses this tragedy wants to know why these folks died in this way, and commences to interviewing the people who knew them, and even devising mathematical formulas to determine why this happened, because he wanted to prove that somehow this

was all part of God's providential plan. Finally, he concluded there was no plan. God does not exact retribution because God is love.

There's another character in the novel, an Abbess, who cares for the deaf and the dying, who was fond of saying that the bridge between the living and the dead is love, and God calls us to dwell in the things of love and not any other bridge. Whatever meaning we discover in life doesn't rest in idle speculation but in the things of love.

I think that is what Jesus is getting at when he issues a resounding "no" to the heady speculation about the cause of suffering and then says rather brusquely, "unless you repent, you will all perish as they did!"

In other words, find your meaning in the things of God that are the things of love. Derive meaning not so much in questions about God, as interesting as they are, but in living questions that deal with our lives in God. The call to repent is always a call to move deeper into God who woos us and takes us on a lifelong journey of change.

Ask questions such as these ...

- How will I practice the Jesus way of love?
- What courage do I need to love others and myself?
- How might we bear good fruit?

And the big questions in Lent are these ...

- What do I/ we need to renounce in order to accept the free gift of love that Jesus offers?
- What do I need to risk in order to accept Jesus' free offer of love?

These are not questions for a test or an exam, but questions we are called to live and explore.

Today, our candidates for baptism as well as our sisters and brothers choosing to renew their baptismal vows will stand before us again. And they will be asked questions followed by a period of silence. You are invited to hold these persons in prayer and allow the questions to travel down into your own hearts:

- How has God supported you and guided you in your journey?
- What need to be pruned out of your life and what nourishment do you need from God to bear fruit?

Sit with these questions. Pray these questions. Live these questions.

Seek the Lord while he may be found. Return to the God of all mercy.

God doesn't promise you easy answers but better than all of that, God gives you the gift of God's self. Amen.