

Dig the Soil and Add the Fertilizer

By: Meagan McLaughlin

March 20, 2022. Why? The need to know is a very human thing. We humans have been asking for centuries why bad things happen to good people. The sermon today is about our reading from Luke on Jesus' response to the suffering of the Galileans, and the parable of the barren fig tree.

Reading: [Luke 13:1-9](#)

*** Transcript ***

Years ago, I was babysitting for my cousin's three kids, the youngest of whom was about two or three at the time. Ben's favorite word was "why." "What's this?" "These are my glasses." "Why?" "So I can see with them." "Why?" "Because my eyes need help. You can try them, but you need to be very gentle." "Why?" "Because they're breakable." "They're breakable... why?" At this point, I couldn't help it anymore and I began to laugh. Then I promptly needed to apologize, and explain to an offended Ben that my glasses were breakable because they could break.

It seems like most of us go through that phase of asking why about everything we encounter, in our quest to learn about the world that we live in. And for the most part we grow out of that, perhaps because we learn to search for answers to a lot of our questions ourselves. (Google is really helpful, isn't it?) Or perhaps because we begin to feel confident in our capacity to understand the world to our satisfaction, and even at times feel a certain level of control over our lives, illusory though that might be.

The last few years have shattered that illusion of control in spades, hasn't it? Two years ago, we celebrated my installation with Bishop Candeia joining us. And two years ago, we were all entering into a world that at the time we could never have imagined. The pandemic, along with everything else that has been occupying our newsfeed, is enough to have us all scrambling to find ways to manage the chaos. And enough to have us all asking why as much as Ben, although about far weightier subjects than eyeglasses.

Why a pandemic?

Why so much upheaval, with so much people in so much pain?

Why so much heartless attack on the dignity and lives of vulnerable people, like trans people and their families and allies, who aren't hurting anyone?

Why such a bloodthirsty lust for land and power that they, and we, don't need, that leads to inhumane treatment of people at our borders, or terrifying war in Ukraine, and so many other places in the world that we have honestly forgotten about most of them?

This? Now? Really, God? Why?

The desire — the need — to know is a very human thing. We humans have been asking why bad things happen to good people for so many centuries that books have been written in an attempt to answer that question. (And it is interesting that we don't necessarily ask why around good things — getting the new job, a clean bill of health, or a just resolution to conflict — but about things at their worst.) It's so much a part of human nature that when people tell Jesus about the death of the Galileans, they don't have to actually ask the question. Jesus hears the question in the telling... Why did these people all die?

And beyond that, Jesus hears the speculations and the suspicions they carry. The same speculations

held by those who looked at the man born blind and asked Jesus, “Who sinned, to cause his blindness?” The same that has us ask today when someone is the victim of a crime, “Why were they there? What were they doing? Do they have a criminal record?” There must be a reason. They must have caused it, somehow.

The first thing Jesus does in our gospel today is acknowledge the why, and name the assumed answers that he knows people carry. “Do you think they died because they were worse sinners than anyone else? Do you think this is punishment for their wrongdoing?” And Jesus’ answer is an emphatic, “No. This same thing could happen to you too,” taking away any safety they may have felt by thinking that the victims of these tragedies had done something to deserve what happened to them.

As I felt the harshness of this, I realized how clearly this illustrates the truth that when we judge others, and try to figure out what they did wrong, in conscious or unconscious hope that we will not suffer the way that they did, we are inevitably judging ourselves, too. By judging others, we are in a sense guaranteeing that we will share their fate, that we too will find ourselves lost not only in the brokenness of this world, but in judgment — our own and others.

Thankfully, Jesus doesn’t stop there. At first, the story of the fig tree seems oddly out of place in the context of the conversation Jesus is having, but as he shares this short parable, Jesus actually tells us what to do when the “whys” of life elude us. We hear first the judgment. “See that fig tree? It’s not good enough. Cut it down.” And then we hear the new way that Jesus is suggesting for us. “Let me nurture it, do the bit I can to give it a chance for life, and give it time. Let’s see what happens.” There is no promise here of the outcome. We never hear what happens to the fig tree in the end. It is not the responsibility of the gardener to make the tree bear fruit, after all. They simply do what they can, what they are moved to do, to embody love and grace in the place they are, in the time they have.

The same is true for us. Like the gardener, we cannot on our own solve the problems of the world, accomplish all the things, make all trees bear fruit — not even ourselves. Like the gardener, we are invited in each moment to do the thing we’re moved to do, to embody love and grace in the place we are, in the time we have. To dig soil and add fertilizer, if you will, and entrust the rest to God’s loving care.

And through it all, in Christ we know that God is with us. The God who formed the world, shaped each of us and breathed life into us, has walked with us these last two years of ministry together in a pandemic, guiding and inspiring us as we creatively dug soil and added fertilizer to our community through parking lot food and school supply collections, Palm Sunday processions, park and churchyard cleanups wearing our masks, Saturday evening churchyard worship, and parking lot Advent children's program, trunk or treat, and so many other things.

And God will be with us in the years to come, as we continue to follow the Spirit and discover how we are called in this place, and this time, to embody the love, justice, and grace of God in the world around us.

Jesus ends the parable with an invitation to patience and trust, knowing that it takes time for fertilizer to work and fruit to grow. And so I end with the words from Archbishop Oscar Romero to encourage us on our journey.

“It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that's the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.”

So let us go and dig soil and add fertilizer, and wait to see what the Spirit will do.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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