

When I was newly ordained, I taught graduate and undergraduate Theology at St. Francis College in Loretto, Pennsylvania for a couple of years. I especially loved teaching the undergraduates. By the time students are in college, they're not afraid to challenge anything you say, and I loved the repartee. A lot of people seem to think college students are just hormones on legs, but I always told them they were angels – with an incredible capacity for beer! I taught them that religion deals with 2 types of questions – questions to which everyone already knows the answers and questions to which no one knows the answers. Now this is bad if you're a student – but a lot of fun if you're the professor! So, when a student came back to complain about a C on the theology exam and asked: "Why did I get a C?" I would say, "Well, you partly answered the question, but you didn't deal with the larger philosophical issues, the existential and phenomenological dimensions, not even considering the eschatological and mystical realities involved." Then as the student stumbled out of my office, bumping into the furniture, bouncing off the walls, he would say to his friends "You know I was really lucky to get a C on this paper!"

Religion deals with so many questions like that – but so does life. And when we don't get answers, we're apt to get cynical – or take cheap answers that do not do the reality any justice.

One day when I was pastor in Chapel Hill, I was going down the hall at Duke Children's Hospital. A woman grabbed me by the lapel, pushed her face close to mine and said, "My child has just been diagnosed with a rare and generally fatal illness. Why did this happen to my little boy? What have we done to deserve this?"

I was silent. You're probably shocked that I was actually rendered speechless! You may think that, if I were really a good pastor, I would have something to say to her question. There are a lot of pastors who seem to. I rather often find myself at a loss for words in situations of tragedy or loss. Which brings me to today's gospel.

How do we explain Jesus in today's gospel? The people come to Jesus with 2 instances of tragedy: How about those Galileans whom Pilate put to the sword at the temple, their throats slit right there in church? Why did they deserve such a fate?

And Jesus, so sensitive to human need, says, "I tell you unless you repent you will all likewise perish." So much for the warm-fuzzy Jesus! And then the folks ask about the 18 people killed when a tower fell on them in Siloam; they were some of their own – they were Jews.

In both examples they have covered the landscape of tragedy. The Galileans were outsiders, the Jerusalemites were insiders. The Galileans were killed by the government, among the millions of victims of cruel and oppressive tyrants down through the centuries. The Jerusalemites were killed by a natural disaster, among the millions who have perished in earthquakes, wind and fire. That just about covers tragedy – human initiated and naturally caused. So often the first question we ask when something bad happens to us is 'why did this happen to me?'

How can God be good and still allow bad things to happen to good people – people like us? Here would be my 2 Religion Exam questions: 1) What did those Galileans do to get slaughtered by Pilate? 2) Why were those Jerusalemites in the wrong place at the wrong time when the tower fell? As interesting as we may find these questions, Jesus does not answer them to any of our satisfaction – here or anywhere else in the New Testament. Jesus simply said: "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other

Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you, No: Unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” My pastoral theology class professor would have flunked Jesus with His response. NOT very sensitive!

On another occasion, when asked about all of this Jesus said “Well, God makes His sun to shine on the good and the bad; His rain to fall on the just and the unjust.” That’s all. The good and the bad get both sun and rain. That’s all? Is that the best Jesus can do?

In John 9, the story of the man born blind, the people ask Jesus: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (Jn 9:2) Surely there must be some reason, some direct correlation between sin and misfortune, between bad people and bad luck. No, Jesus says there isn’t any correlation. Jesus didn’t give an answer because there isn’t one. When a Pilate swings a sword, the closest person gets cut. When the earth heaves and a tower falls, anyone underneath, good or bad, perishes. When cells go haywire in our bodies, anyone of us can get cancer or a clot or some other disease. None of it depends on our goodness – or even on our sin. We have to accept that there is just a kind of randomness to life.

But when tragedy strikes close at home, we all become armchair theologians. A young person is severely injured in an automobile accident. We want an explanation. Were they driving too fast? Wearing a seatbelt? Drinking? Were they going to church? Living in a good moral way?” If someone gets lung cancer we immediately ask, “Were they a smoker?” If it’s a heart attack: “Did they not take care of their health? Were they overweight?” “NO,” Jesus answers – “Forget about that stuff – do you think they were a worse offender than you?”

Jesus knows how our questions deter us from THE questions. THE question, it seems to me, is not about unfairness – how can bad things happen to good people like us. The Jesus question is not about justice. What do I deserve? THE question is the cross – do we actually accept it? Are willing to pick it up each day and follow in Jesus’ footsteps? How do we stand before God? A lot of theological argument is just a distraction. The question is WHO AM I BECOMING IN MY SUFFERINGS? AM I BECOMING A LOVING, COMPASSIONATE, FORGIVING PERSON? Or just a person who needs to be right and have the correct answers? Or a person who is bitter and angry that life hasn’t worked out as I had hoped?

The book WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE, by Rabbi Harold Kushner, was a best seller not only because it is written so well, but because it flatters so well a self-pitying, narcissistic age. For us, any suffering is patently unfair and undeserved, any confusion, any unknowing or tragedy, is unfair, because so long ago we stopped trusting a God whose presence makes sufferings, confusion, unknowing, and tragedy bearable. They asked Jesus about life’s fairness; but He wouldn’t answer. He forced them to examine their relationship with God.

And if we’re honest, we have to admit we mostly don’t want God. We want answers. We want to be right. We do not want the cross or a suffering Savior. We want power. We want things fixed. And we want it now. God’s answers are often confusing and frightening. Often people decide to look for answers elsewhere. Leave church. Look for a God – and a church – that demands less than repentance, forgiveness, and love.

Why did this bad thing happen to me? To my family? Probably, for no particular reason. Bad things happen to the good and the bad all the time. The notion that only good things happen to good people was put to rest when they hung Jesus on the cross. Jesus BECOMES an answer on the cross. Our faith does not give us an answer to tragedy – or a way around tragedy – but a way THROUGH tragedy. And it forces us to ask OURSELVES a question: Can we trust God – in joy or in pain – to be our God? Can we love God without linking our love to the cards that life deals out to us? Or are we a fair-weather disciple – as long as things are going

well, I'll come to church, drop in a few dollars and feel good about myself. But if this doesn't spare me tragedy and pain, I'm out of here. If you keep pushing me to open my heart or my wallet, or upset my weekend schedule with mass time changes, I'm out of here.

Being a disciple of Jesus carries no promises about good or bad – save the promise of the cross – and the promise that God will not allow anything worse to happen to us than happened to His own Son. And that's not much comfort, is it?

So we come here on Sundays, to the Lord's Table. We are given, not answers, but a Word from God which often challenges us as well as comforts us. We are given a bit of bread and a bit of wine – which are for us, nothing less than the Broken Body and spilled-out-blood of Christ. This is the way God responds to our questions – not with answers that flatter us, or make the world simpler than it really is, but with His life given for us, poured out in love, that we might more fully give our lives over to Him and our broken and hurting world. Amen. (adapted from Will Willimon, in PULPIT RESOURCE, Jan-March 2016, p. 38-39)