**Why?**

*Rev. John Allen*

“Why?”

It is a simple one world question that is baffling in almost any circumstance.

Anyone who has had an argument with a 4-year-old can tell you.

“Can I have another cookie.”

“No.”

“Why.”

“Because one is enough”

“Why”

“Because the sugar will keep you awake.”

“Why”

“I don’t know, that's just what sugar does, and you need to sleep.”

“Why”

“Because you need to be rested tomorrow.”

“Why.”

A predicable argument that leads to a predictable end. “Because I said so.”

It may be final. But it is never that satisfying.

At some point in everyone of our lives we started asking why.

Perhaps it started with simple questions.

“Why can’t I pull the dog’s tail”

“Why can’t I stay up?”

Then it gets a little more scientific

“Why is the sky blue?”

“Why does it rain?”

As we grow up the questions get deeper, and more existential.

“Why am I here?”

“Why are people so cruel?”

“Why did this happen to me?”

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There had been a few tragedies in Jerusalem that week. And people wanted Jesus to weigh in.

A large group of Galileans worshipping in the Temple were killed by Roman soldiers, their own blood mixing in with the blood of their sacrifices to God. Why?

And then on the other side of town, a tower from the city’s wall collapsed killing 18. Why?

Was it because these people were evil? Had the done something to deserve it?

Jesus, who so rarely give a straight answer to any question gives an answer to this one.

No.

It is not because they were worse sinners than anyone else. Its not because they had it coming.

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Back during my brief stint as a hospital chaplain, I covered an Emergency Department at St. Lukes Hospital in Harlem. Chaplaincy training takes a “throw them in the water and they will figure out how to swim” approach to teaching, so on my very first day I was sent out to see patients.

“One thing you should prepare for though.” My supervisor said. “People are going to ask you why this happened to them. You should think now about what you are going to say.”

And she was right. I got that question more times than I can count. From people who received terminal diagnosis, to parents who were grieving the senseless loss of a child.

That same question that we all started asking when we were toddlers. We never seem to escape it.

“Why?”

I had given it some thought. And I felt like honesty would be my best policy. So to person after person, I summoned every ounce of compassion in my heart. Looked Into their eyes with all the love I could. And full of regret, I told them the truth.

“I don’t know.”

There is a lot more that I could say, and did say. But none of it was an answer to that most urgent question. “Why did this happen?”

Something deep within us just has to keep digging for that meaning.

Barbara Brown Taylor, a great preacher, tells her own story of experience as a chaplain. She went to see a woman whose toddler was about to have surgery for a brain tumor.

“It’s all my fault.” The mother told her. “God is punishing me for smoking. I tried to stop but I didn’t. So my daughters is sick and she’s going to die.”

And the mother could not be persuaded otherwise, because she much preferred the idea that this was all her fault and that God was punishing her, to the idea that God was powerless to stop her daughter’s disease. Taylor writes: “there had to be a reason, and she was willing to be that reason.”

And the examples are all around us.

But the one that really sets me off is when I hear public religious leaders in the wake of some natural disaster, or act of mass violence, imply that the suffering is God’s punishment of one sin or another.

Hurricane Katrina was blamed on homosexuality by multiple prominent leaders.

And one even proclaimed that the Sandy Hook massacre was God’s judgment on America for not allowing public prayer in schools.

But its not the just the seismic and tragic.

How many times have you scrutinized yourself to within an inch of your life after a small setback or embarrassment. How often have you laid awake at night searching in vain to find the wrong turn you took, or the wrong thing that you said.

I think that we are susceptible to that kind of thinking because we have a really hard time, from childhood to adulthood, when the question why cannot be answered.

It strains our very sense of ourselves when we cannot figure out why.

We scrutinize past decisions and choices, wondering at what moment we took a wrong turn, or missed the right opportunity. We connect dots that have no business being connected. All to avoid admitting something astonishingly simple.

Sometimes bad things just happen, for no good reason at all.

That is what Jesus was telling his disciples when they came asking about the dead Galileans in the temple, and the ordinary folks who were crushed beneath the rubble of that tower. Did they do something to deserve it? No.

Sometimes bad things just happen. Sometimes there is simply no one to blame.

It’s a hard answer to live with. But its the truth. And sometimes it can lead to a pretty nihilistic outlook.

Well Jesus has an answer for that too. Lest his disciples think suddenly that they are freed to live as if nothing matters.

“But” he says, “if you do not repent. You will perish just like them.”

It’s Jesus’ way of saying don’t think that that means your actions don’t have consequences. It just means that those consequences are not arbitrary.

In this case though Jesus is using the plural you, he is saying if you all do not change your ways you all are in trouble. Jesus is reminding us that it is not God who is the architect of most of the worlds evil and pain.

We are.

Mary Luti a UCC pastor and mentor of mine said it this way:

She said: “This is what Jesus is getting at when he says we will all surely perish if we don’t change. He urges us to repentance not because God is lying in wait for us, but because too many of us are lying in wait for each other. God is not punishing us; we are punishing each other pretty skillfully, all on our own.”

We need to remember that piece too. Many of us find our way into progressive, warm, and welcoming faith communities like this one because we have been turned off by the punitive God that was proclaimed elsewhere.

Here we talk often about God’s unconditional love. About our own beloved-ness. About forgiveness. And grace.

We are reminded here that God is not really in the business of payback and punishment.

And that is a lovely place to be. It would be a lovely place to stop, and simply bask contented in the beauty of God’s love knowing that God will not condemn us.

But its not enough. Jesus says we also need to change, not just our own lives, but we together need to change our community and the world in which we love.

Our response to the amazing grace we have received cannot be to celebrate God’s love for us, but then continue to live in our old self-centered ways.

Consuming with abandon. Polluting without remorse. Ignoring the poor. Being dishonest. Believing that our needs should always come first.

God will forgive us all these things and more.

God’s forgiveness is not a blank check. It’s a fresh slate. It is an opportunity to truly live in a new way.