
I had two weeks to mull over today’s scripture lessons, instead of the usual weeklong race to the finish line. – +++ – …Two weeks to wrestle with one of the biggest and most unanswerable questions we Christians face – it’s the age-old Theodicy Problem, which boils down to this:: “Why do bad things happen to good people??” +++ It’s such a simple question to ask – and an impossible one to answer. +++ Now, maybe any random two weeks would give us plenty to chew on – but as I had this question bouncing around in my head through these particular two weeks,… +++ … Cyclone Idai (ee-DIE) devastated Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi, with a death count that’s officially over 700 so far but rising quickly – millions of lives disrupted – and many still waiting to be rescued a week later. +++ The Linwood Islamic Center in Christchurch, New Zealand, was attacked by a white supremacist – killing 50 people and injuring another 50 – people who had come to worship peacefully. +++ +++ The world stops making sense when violence and chaos attack us from the rear and steal our sense of order… our sense of stability… So, we start grasping at straws – trying to explain – “WHY did that happen?” – and “HOW can I feel sure it won’t happen to ME?” +++ They must have done something wrong. …They weren’t careful enough… They built on low-lying coastline… They aren’t sophisticated like we are. +++ There’s got to be a reason. Someone to blame… +++ +++ Immigrants… after fleeing from violence, are separated from their children – locked up – and then – in many cases, they are returned back to where they came from with no way to reconnect with their children. ::: But we manage to come to terms with it::: “They should have known what would happen… It’s their fault.” +++ +++ An unarmed young black man in a hoodie is gunned down on the street. ::: “He shouldn’t have been there at that time of night. He should’ve followed instructions.” ::: And at a ridiculous extreme, Pat Robertson and the Christians he represents have recently come out with yet another ludicrous claim that all America’s problems – from hurricanes to terrorist attacks – are God’s wrath over our growing acceptance of the LGBTQ community. +++ +++ WHY do BAD things happen to Good People? Because somehow – some way – they deserve it. It’s somebody’s FAULT.

But Jesus says “NO!” +++ In today’s reading, some people bring Jesus horrible news about Pontius Pilate having a group of Jews massacr ed and their blood mixed with the blood of lambs they had just sacrificed. That’s disgusting! Why would something like that happen? … Surely, they did something to deserve it? Provoked the Romans in some way?? But, Jesus says, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” +++ Then Jesus brings up something else that happened recently:: asking, “Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them — do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” +++ +++ Let GOD worry about WHY – because it’s out of your hands.

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As you know, I’ve spent these last two weeks in Cuba – visiting our siblings in Christ at La Iglesia Presbiteriana en Güínes, along with Linda, Barbara and Dennis, Patricia, Zanetta, and our friends from other churches in the area… Before going, I wanted to know more about what to expect, so I spent some time reading online discussion groups and articles about mission work in Cuba. It was clear that the Holy Spirit is doing a lot of important work there through Cubans and their American partners – not the least of which is our Long Island/Cuba Partnership. +++ But mixed in with the affirmations was an undercurrent that it’s wrong to partner with Cubans – that anything that builds up “those communists” harms the United States:::::: as though an economic blockade should limit God’s work among God’s people. +++ They somehow deserve to live on an average of $20 per month,… it’s their own fault that their infrastructure for water, roads, and power is crumbling away before their very eyes… +++ +++ I had a chance to have a nice long chat with Pastor Abel – “Pastor to Pastor.” I asked him about his goals for our partnership and what outcomes he wants to be sure we work with them to achieve… And, I was interested to see how aware he is of the underlying resistance to Cuban Missions. He said, “I know that to many Americans we are just Communists – why should you be working with those bad people? But my people? – we don’t think about that. We just try to get by each day… – we try to be good to each other – and we praise
God. I want people in the United States to see how many of us praise God – and I want the people in Cuba to see that you praise God, too.” +++ That sounds like a pretty good mission statement to me. +++ So, to that end, let me tell you about a few people I got to know since the last time I stood in this pulpit – people many would prejudge “unworthy” because of where they live… People like Carmen Rosa, who went out and found a special wild herb whose tea is thought to fight cancer – and brought it for me and Linda to bring back for our great-nephew Whitaker… People like Caridad, who has undergone her own treatment for breast cancer, and so wrote an inspirational prayer and good wishes on a card for Whitaker and asked us to bring it back to the states and mail it for her… People like Vivian, who handmade a stole for me and presented it during Sunday worship. +++ Everyone on our team has similar experiences and I encourage you to ask to hear them. Those kind and loving ladies are just three of the many people we know in Güines. And they all suffer from a system of economics and politics they have no control over – yet they praise God with all their hearts. +++ From today’s text, Christ asks, “do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others?” +++ And the answer is NO. +++ So why DO we build up these walls between us? Why do we write people off – categorize them – and judge them – before we even know them? +++ Why do we have to find a way to understand – to explain – why bad things happen to these good people?

But Christ gives us an alternative to think about. Don’t even focus on that. Instead focus on something you CAN do something about – your own repentance. – Step away from your own tendency to judge – stop looking for WHY the Lord so often allows chaos to surround us. +++ Focus, instead, on changing your own life… Repenting… and following Christ. +++ THEN go back into the world with a clean heart – to serve as Jesus served. +++ If everyone did THAT – Isaiah tells us what kind of world we could create – ”Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” +++ God invites everyone TO THE TABLE to enjoy the benefits of God’s creation and grace. +++ And for those of us already fortunate enough to have what we need, and more to spare, Isaiah charges us,: “you shall call nations that you do not know,… and nations that do not know you, shall run to you because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.” +++ And if all God’s people follow that call, the whole world will be seated AT THE TABLE, TOGETHER, crying out in unison today’s words from the Psalmist,: “”My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips… for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.”

Christ calls us not to give up on people – including ourselves – no matter who they are – no matter what they’ve done – or failed to do. In the closing verses of our gospel reading, we find the Parable of the Fig Tree. The man wants to give up on a tree – to cut it down because it has grown for three years without bearing fruit. “It’s just a waste of soil,” he cries. +++ But the Gardener says No. He is still working on it, still digging around it, still fertilizing it, giving it plenty of water, and love. +++ The GOOD NEWS is that Christ IS our loving gardener. +++ He hasn’t given up on you… When you are ready to give up on yourself – when you’ve disappointed loved ones – survived tragedy and can’t imagine where your life might lead you next;::: our master gardener is still working on you, still digging here and there around your roots, still feeding you, and watering you – his divine hands knowing there is still good fruit to be had from your branches. +++ +++ At the same time… the parable teaches that judgment is for CHRIST, not us. When we look out across the world – at our families – our community – our sorely divided nation – at nations suffering typhoons or mass shootings – as well as those laboring under dictators and oppressive governments –+++ Christ tells us not to see trees that should be dug up and discarded – instead we should see trees that are under his loving care – trees Christ will NEVER give up on, which need our attention as well, as his hands and feet in the world. +++ Be a witness of THIS::: – if the Holy Spirit can heal and grow unifying relationships and agape love among churches from nations as bitterly divided as the US and Cuba – instead of giving up on us::: …+++ what can the Lord yet accomplish in YOUR life?… As we are ALL called to The Table, Together, to feast on his grace, what work are YOU called to do among those you might have been ready to give up on? +++ Are you ready to take them by the hand as you enter the hall… will you pull out their chair… sit beside them to share the feast?… Will you glorify God… together?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.