

What did they do to deserve that?

Jesus knew the question on everyone's minds

Explain the horrible news:

Pontius Pilate...

Yes the same guy who crucified Christ
slaughtered a dozen Galilean Jews...

during a sacrificial offering

Why?

Were they worse sinners than the people standing with them?

Did they ***deserve*** a brutal death?

Jesus said... **No.**

When The Tower of Siloam fell, killing eighteen people...

Crushed because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Is that because they were sinners?

Again... Jesus said **No.**

Yet we still assume...

God's tracking our good stuff and our bad stuff

And dishing out appropriate punishments and/or rewards

Again... Jesus said, **No.**

Does God allow tyrants to kill people

or tsunamis to drown cities

or thousands of people laid off from their jobs

or learn that the tumor is malignant

because they deserved it?

Jesus says... **No.**

Some time earlier, Jesus was asked,
Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?
 Jesus said, *Neither...* and then... cured his blindness.
 Jesus... *rejects* the notion... that sin *causes* disasters
 We've all heard it,
I wonder what he did to deserve that?
This plague/disaster/personal catastrophe
is God's punishment... for sin.

Well... says Jesus... take it from me... that is *not* how it works.

Sometimes we *do* suffer as a direct result of a bad decision...
 something we've neglected... *and we suffer the consequences.*
 Mistreat your body... you get hurt.
 Mistreat a friend... and you damage the relationship.
 Negative consequences *can* be clear... sometime instantaneous.

But what about when we've done a good thing... and suffered for it.

As Christians, we really shouldn't be too surprised
 The idea that only good things happen to good people
 was put to rest when Jesus was nailed to the cross!

Christian faith is no magic protection against tragedy.
 The cross is *our* identity
 the cross... where an innocent man died the death of a criminal. Yet
 through the ages,
 Christians have wondered why bad things happen to good people.

In his book *The City of God*,
 St. Augustine examined the suffering when barbarians sacked Rome.
 He noticed that when the barbarians raped and pillaged
 Christians suffered just as much as non-Christians.

Faith in Christ did not make them immune to pain and tragedy.

Augustine wrote,

Christians differ from Pagans, not in the ills which befall them, but in what they do with the ills that befall them.

The Christian faith does not give us a way around tragedy.

Faith gives us a way through tragedy.

We can't look at tragedy and assume that someone deserved it.

But Jesus says,

unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

What kind of a reply is that?

Jesus didn't say questions are bad... especially, ***why***...

Jesus said,

Don't be distracted by the wrong question.

To Jesus, the 'why' isn't important.

God made us in love and gave us free will,
freedom to choose how to respond, how to act.

In freedom, humans have written symphonies and started wars.

God made a dynamic world in which natural things change and evolve
into beautiful new forms of life and into cancer cells.

According to Jesus, the question isn't

What did they do to deserve such suffering?

The ***real*** question is:

How is your relationship with God?

Don't be distracted by looking at what happened to someone else.

Don't waste time wondering what someone did what they are getting.

Instead, look at ***yourself*** – **while you still have time.**

Jesus asks...

What in your life needs repenting, acknowledging, and turning around?

What needs to be turned over to God? What needs to be forgiven?

Things happen.

And while the gift of earthly life is still ours, we need to ask ourselves, how is our relationship with God?

Do we love our neighbors as ourselves?

Are we relieving the suffering of others?

or just pointing our fingers...

Look closely at the hand that *points*

One finger points at others... while three other fingers *point back at us!*

Our own repentance is the issue, because deserving isn't.

The scandal at the heart of our faith is that God already loves us;

that God doesn't need a ledger or tally sheet

because we don't do anything to deserve God's love.

We have no favor to earn,

because God already sees us as beloved.

All we have to do is live...

and explore the amazing mystery of our acceptance.

We can't lose God's favor and make bad things happen to us

because we don't earn God's favor in the first place.

Life is short.

Don't be distracted by the wrong questions.

And don't be disappointed if Jesus asks you

to love God more than you love answers.

Because Jesus *will* do that.

When people asked Jesus questions

he often responded... not with *an answer*... but with **a story**.

Like he did in today's Gospel lesson.

A man planted a fig tree.

The fig tree used lots of nutrients but didn't produce any figs.

Why should I let this do-nothing tree use up good soil? Cut it down!

But the gardener replies,

Give it another year.

I'll do everything I can for it.

If it bears fruit, great!

If not, cut it down.

The gardener is not efficient, practical, or logical.

He's going to waste ***more*** nutrients, efforts, and space on a tree that shows no sign of producing figs.

Does the fig tree deserve it?

That's not the question!

The story is about ***an extravagant gardener***

who remind us of another gardener from the beginning of time...

who just couldn't help it when he picked up some dirt.

who just had to form it into a human and breathe life into it.

who just had to make it into someone to love,

someone who would be free to choose to love in return.

Can you hear this gardener at work in your own lives?

Wait. Give me another year.

I'll do all that I can to nurture this tree.

Just one more year.

Then it will produce fruit.

Underserved Good is what we get from God

Matthew 5:45

***God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good,
and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.***

Romans 6:23

***For the wages of sin is death,
but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.***

Ephesians 2:8-9

***For by grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not your own doing;
it is the gift of God... not the result of works,
so that no one may boast.***

A shape up or ship out gospel... is no gospel at all.

It flies in the face of everything we learn, in human experience,
and in scripture as well.

This sad little fig tree that's such a lousy job at bearing fruit...
gets another chance!

More nourishment.

More care.

More time.

Why?

Because of God's love... God's grace

Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden,
and I will refresh you.

Remember my first question today?

What did they do to deserve that punishment?

The better question is...and always will be...

What did we do to deserve this grace?

And the answer is... Nothing.