

## Lent 3C

I read a blog this week about the author Leo Buscaglia who was asked to read submissions from readers about acts of kindness they had witnessed and arbitrate some kind of “kindness” award. One of the most moving stories from the accounts he shared was about a four year old boy who, seeing his elderly neighbor, recently widowed, sitting on a bench, ran into the man’s yard and crawled up into his lap. When asked later what he had said to the man, the young boy replied, ‘Nothing. I just helped him cry.’

We are living in a time of stunning, profound sadness. We encounter news every day that leaves us baffled by the greed and hate lashing out at the vulnerable, and lost as to how to respond. If ever we needed the capacity to sit in the grief of one another and help one another cry, this is that time. And I will continue the sacred song that Father Dennis introduced last week, that lament, tears with and for one another, is a holy call.

Here we are, continuing our dance through Lent; this season when we tell the truth of the fragility of life - that we are beautiful, broken beings held together by grace and duct tape. The season when we set aside silver linings and (for a moment) the triumphal end to the story and we sit in the darkness of our reality and discover that, even here - maybe especially here, Love dwells.

In the Gospel today we meet both of those realities - the unfinished, broken reality of our humanity and unflinching steadfastness of Love.

We meet Jesus, toward the end of a much longer conversation between Jesus and the crowds, that has covered a number of topics that roughly work together to focus on who we are, who we could be, in the face of hardship.

Just before this exchange Jesus has called them out for a failure to pay attention and notice what is going on around them. “Why is it that you find yourself so confused and off balance in understanding and responding to these times,” he asks?

This feels familiar - a little too close to home. I most definitely feel confused and off balance in knowing how to respond to the times before us. Jesus seems to intimate that in the depths of our hearts we know - we know what led us here and we do, in fact, know what to do. But most days I feel like one of this crowd - I'm not sure how we got here and I am certainly unclear about what to do. These texts, I think, are leading us to at least a piece of the answer.

I am not really clear why the crowd's response to this 'calling out' is to cue up a conversation about the nature of suffering. It is as if they throw out genocide and natural disaster to prove the impossibility of action, to which Jesus says, if I can restate - "exactly! Get busy!"

What about the Galileans that Pilate had murdered as they worshiped, their blood mixed with their sacrifices? What about the workers who were crushed under the falling tower at Siloam? Today we might cry out, What about Gaza? What about tornados and flooding and wild fires? We don't hear more from the crowds, but from Jesus' response we can guess that their thoughts had drifted toward a belief that these terrible things happened because the Galileans and workers at Siloam had been sinful. Again, today this might come out as, "well, they did take hostages....or if they had better forest management this wouldn't have happened..." And Jesus shuts down that line of thinking with a resounding "no!"

We often have a protective, emotional defense to tragedy. It is our instinct to look for a reason, a place to set the blame so that we don't have to be concerned that the same might happen to us. We are afraid and we want to put things into understandable boxes - this is what makes our brains feel safe. Sometimes this is done in really blatantly evil ways - like proclaiming that the tremendous damage of that hurricane is God's retribution for this or that "sinful" group in the community. But other times it happens much more subtly like when we stand in the hospital room or grave side and perpetuate some mixed up theology like "everything happens for a reason" or "God won't give you more than you can handle."

But Tracy, you say, we just read in Corinthians today that God will not test us beyond what we can bear. Well, thank you for asking - because yes that verse is misused all the time in moments of hardship. It is not that you will

never have an experience that feels absolutely unbearable- it is that you will never face a struggle in which God is not present with you, you will never face a grief that God will not love you through. Great suffering is present in this world that tests the very limits of our hearts to survive and in all of those moments Love is present - we are not alone and God's strength will sustain us.

To those in the crowd Jesus is clear that suffering like this cannot be explained or understood through a lens of sin. And then, confusingly says, "But I tell you unless you repent, you too will die." Which I think is to say, that a dramatic change of heart is necessary to even ask the right questions or to live in a way that life has meaning.

For Jesus, this moment of suffering, this moment of genocide and disaster in his own community, this clear picture of life's fragility brings out an urgency - an urgency fueled by blood and rubble and loss and his message to the crowd is - "and you, how will you live this one precious life you get to live?" Repent.

This word, Repent, Metanoia, has a lot of moralistic baggage. But at its heart it is less about doing good and avoiding evil and more about seeing things differently. Fr. Gregory Boyle writes, "it is to move beyond the mind you have. It is an invitation to embrace the mystical view and to see as God does.." It is about transformation, a reconfiguring of our perspective. It is to orient ourselves toward God.

Jesus walks us into this parable that illustrates what "seeing as God does" in the midst of great suffering might look like. "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the man working the vineyard, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?'

It is so hard for us to hold space for the barren trees in our own lives. Make it better or chop it down! We are so conditioned to devalue that in ourselves or our world that is not "productive." And sorrow and grief certainly do not feel productive. In Christian contexts they certainly do not seem to proclaim the goodness of God or to bear the fruit of good works.

But Jesus says to this perspective: Repent - To continue to walk in this belief system - to continue to hold suffering in this way is a kind of death - it is destruction to the soul to live in an economy of grace so small. We would stand at the fig tree and call for its destruction and God would argue for more grace - as it turns out endless grace - because God sees the beauty in the tree without need of its fruit.

In response to the man's ire toward the tree the Gardner intervenes: Let's sit with the tree. Let's tend and care for it. In the face of broken and suffering humans (and systems) let's pour out wheelbarrows of grace. If *our* natural tendency toward suffering is to rationalize, justify, silver lining, or ignore it away, Jesus' answer is to sit with it. Jesus' answer gets us back to the purpose of Lent, to sit with the fragility of life in the midst of suffering and loss and to know with the deepest conviction, that God is with us. That the gardener tends the barren and broken tree. That suffering and pain do not have the final word, but that Grace does. That all things will be redeemed...but that is skipping ahead to the end of the story, and we need to wait a few weeks for that.

I recently listened to an interview between NT Wright and Kate Bowler about the Christian response to suffering that posited, that in the midst of unraveling pain, in the midst of the immensity of suffering, that the only holy response is Lament. Wright said, 'for out of lament grows love...for it is through the lens of tears that we see clearly...' We are, in this parable, the man who wants to chop it all down - push the discomfort away. We are the barren tree. And when we are able to do the work of repentance we also get to be the under gardener. Jesus points us toward the hurting broken trees around us and gives our hearts and hands the fertilizer of grace and love to tend them. To one another, to the most vulnerable and dismissed (those most at risk of being chopped down), even to the larger landscapes in our systems - we can choose to be the ones who stay present in and to the pain - bearing light in the darkness. Bearing witness and singing songs of Lament births Love that is tender, and love that is strong and Love that, just glimpsing a bit ahead in the story, ultimately is the undoing of hate. Love that cannot be held back, even by death.

So this is the answer to the question I asked at the beginning - what now? What exactly is it that we are to do in response to these times? Allow yourselves the space to sit in the darkness. Groan and cry in lament. Let tears help you see clearly so that you might be filled with the love needed to tend the fearful and bind up the broken hearts. If you want to find the voice of resistance, it will be found at the cross.

We live in a time where things are not as they should be - where hate has a loud and powerful voice and suffering surrounds us. And we are loved by a God who stays. Who sits with the barren tree and does not abandon it, whose love never fails. And we have been touched with the gentle, tender, fiery, powerful Love of God so that we might be that Love for one another.

So this week, go out and be the under gardener. Bear witness to suffering, speak words of Grace, Help one another to cry. Be the hands and voice of Love that ultimately will change the story.

Amen