WAITING ROOMS AND OTHER WILDERNESSES
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 10:1-15 and Luke 13:1-9

FOCUS: We are called to have faith even as we honestly struggle with the difficult question of undeserved suffering.

What is your gut reaction to our morning texts? Do you wonder about the implication suffering is God’s instrument of discipline? Do you affirm the idea tragedy is not born of God’s design? Do you, like me, find yourself a bit confused? There may be no more difficult, no more hotly debated theological issue than suffering, especially the undeserved suffering of innocent folk. On Tuesday Kathy and I were at the Surgery Center and there were an unusually high number of babies and toddlers having procedures. As I pondered the matter of suffering this week I was reminded of those children who were laughing and smiling in the waiting room, having no idea what was to come, captivated by the universally welcoming smiles and words of the adults in the room. At least one of them was not such a happy camper later. In the post procedure area the breathless cries were as passionately distraught as were the earlier smiles passionately delighted. Kathy commented it had to be difficult to be so young. It was impossible for the toddlers to prepare for what was to come and they didn’t understand the procedures as they unfolded.

There is a parable here. They just could not understand, the whole deal was confusing and unsettling. So are many of the challenges we face. Like those young kids, we have days or weeks which start out filled with smiles and warm wishes, only to discover once we are called back for the procedure things were not as we perceived them. Like the children we cry out in confusion. We can’t understand why the one who brought us here would cause us such pain. We wonder not only about our, often petty, struggles. We ponder the human tragedies we witness all around the globe. We read of young lives lost in automobile accidents just down the road. We hear of honest hard working laborers being laid off, innocent victims of an economy which continues to struggle to recover. We see pictures of entire villages and towns devastated by the competing bombs of ruthless dictators and barbaric terrorists. Just this week we have again seen the effects of terrific storms as they indiscriminately wreak havoc. And we have no simple answers. So in the absence of easy answers how are we to cope with surgery centers, storms and other desert places?

If we are to cope, we, like Paul, we must confront and learn to embrace a hard and uncomfortable truth. As he reminds us later in this first letter to the Corinthian church, we see only in part now and will never fully understand this great mystery called suffering until, one day, we come to see God face to face. But we don’t like having blurred vision. We are not very good at waiting. We want to know and understand everything. Even as we seek to come to grips with with the mystery of suffering we feel we must ask the hard questions. And is what we ought to do. God has no problem with honest questions.

Jesus was questioned about the nature of suffering in our gospel text. As he was teaching the disciples we are told some folks brought a breaking news story. It was the first century equivalent of ***“we interrupt this program.”*** In those days news traveled mostly by foot, or if it was especially important perhaps on horseback. So we see some folks rushing onto the scene, with a message for someone. They walk right up to Jesus, interrupt his lesson and inform him Herod has massacred a group of Galilean worshippers in cold blood. Further, Herod has made a mockery of sacred rights by mixing the worshippers blood with the blood of the sacrificial animals they were preparing.

It was shocking news. Here were folks worshipping God, the God Jesus came to serve and to whom he pointed others. They were being faithful, offering praise. They sought daily to be what God created them to be. And here was Herod, a ruthless and mean-spirited despot, bent on maintaining his grip on power, focused on himself and no one else. Jesus was certainly outraged by the news, shocked Herod would be so bold in his persecution. He may well have shed a tear for those slaughtered, at the appropriate time. But scripture mentions no such reaction, reflects no show of emotion on Jesus part.

We know from a plethora of gospel stories Jesus was a man of compassion, one frequently moved by the suffering of others. Like no one else in all the world Jesus was guided by love in all he did. Yet in this scripture he appeared to be ignoring the horror of the message, showed no outward sign of concern for those whose blood was shed. Maybe he had already heard the news, we are not told. Whatever the situation, Jesus chose to make this a teaching moment for the disciples, not because he didn’t care about the tragedy, rather because he cared deeply about all people and therefore missed no opportunity to reveal God’s truth to those who needed a revelation. The lesson he taught day needs to be proclaimed just as loudly today. The truth of which he spoke needs to be revealed anew here and now, for the cultural misunderstanding against which Jesus spoke is alive and well.

The question is unspoken but was clearly evident in the faces of those before whom Jesus stood. Having heard the news the disciples were wondering, ***“Why? Why would God let this happen?”***  Jesus knew it was out there and he immediately addressed it, sort of. His followers were clearly concerned and confused by the news of the day. Not only was there Herod’s brutality at the temple, there had apparently also been a construction accident near the Pool of Siloam. Both reports are of tragedy visited upon innocents. One describes evil devised by a ruthless Herod, the other suffering by random chance. Eighteen people over near the pool of Siloam are crushed because they happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

These two headlines represent most all suffering. In every tragic situation the truth is either someone caused it, either by intent or by poor judgement, or someone was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time -- malice or chance. Like the disciples, we followers of Jesus struggle to make sense of it all. A popular response then as now was and is to try to find some purpose, some reason, someone or something to hold responsible for the events of the day. ***“Were these worse sinners, Jesus?”*** Behind the question is an implied assumption: these people must have done something to cause God to abandon them in this way.

Many well-meaning Christians, uncomfortable saying, ***“I don't know,”***  need a logical explanation for everything. If there really isn’t one they make one up. I cringe whenever I hear of a well-meaning soul attempting to comfort grieving parents by proclaiming little children die because God needs them more than do the parents. I shake my head when television evangelists pronounce natural disasters punishments tossed out by God in retribution for social ills. I have a difficult time agreeing when I hear, ***“Everything happens for a reason.”*** Some things just happen. To be sure, God can, as promised by Paul, work good out of all things, but is not to say all events are specifically designed by God for a particular purpose. If it were the case we would no longer be free creatures.Being uncomfortable with ambiguity, we are tempted to concoct preposterous explanations for things. Thankfully, Jesus refuses to endorse such thinking. Manufactured certainty is a false god which may bring temporary comfort, but fails to satisfy. ***“Were these worse sinners, Jesus? Were they so bad something had to be done to them?”*** Twice, he says categorically, ***“No!”***

Jesus avoids answering the ***“Why?”*** question. Instead he declares what is not the case. He makes no attempt to explain God’s role in suffering. Rather he seeks to make one thing abundantly clear, God does not sit around all day planning to send suffering down on those who are most evil. We misrepresent God when we declare those who suffer most to be the most egregious of sinners. Jesus didn’t clarify God’s role in our suffering or in the suffering of others, but he did declare there is no direct correlation between the level of suffering and the seriousness of the sin of the afflicted.

There is another gospel truth here which can be even more difficult to swallow. It is the clear message if we are to be true disciples we ought not flee suffering. Such is the unmistakable challenge behind the call to take up our cross. Those words of Jesus are often misinterpreted, watered down. How many times have you thought or heard someone say about a difficult relationship, an irritating coworker, or a minor inconvenience, ***“Well it is just my cross to bear.”*** But Jesus was not talking about minor irritations or difficult people. He was reminding us we must intentionally put aside some of our mortal impulses, must die to our inherent tendencies to look out for number one. We are called to become new creatures, those who take risks, who stand up for unpopular truths, who defy conventional logic, who challenge the status quo and if we do all we will face consequences.

We are not to seek out our suffering. We all know those who love to decry their “poor pitiful” state of being, who wear every little hardship as a badge of courage, who delight in sharing their woes. Such is not cross bearing, it is self-indulgence. Seeking out and reveling in misery is no less misguided than arguing all suffering is directly related to some terrible sin. Yet, for some reason I am yet to fully understand, God chose to so structure the world we will all face the refining fire of difficulty and hardship. What sets true disciples apart is not the level of suffering but the response when suffering comes.

Jesus does not explain the origin of the suffering, he only declares what it is not. He then moves on to offer up the very Lenten idea because we are all guilty of sin, we all need to repent or we will suffer consequences. Jesus did not proclaim the eighteen construction workers or the worshipers slaughtered at the temple free of sin, they were not. He did assert their misfortune was, as is much suffering, unrelated to their sin. Implied is the message, absence of suffering is never to be mistaken for God’s seal of approval. We have all sinned and are all far from what we ought to be. So whether at the moment we suffer or not, we would be well served to confess our sin and to make our hearts ready for the hard work of repentance and transformation, accepting we may never in this life fully understand how suffering works.

In the Old Testament lectionary text for today Isaiah says, ***“Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near, let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”***

The sound of the young patient at the surgery center tugged at our heartstrings as we heard the anguished and confused cries. But I am sure there were a couple of parents for whom the sound was far more distressing. They would have almost certainly endured the pain for the child if they could have. They wished more than anything they could somehow explain why the procedure was necessary, but it was not possible. Yet one day when the little one is older he or she will be able to understand it was for their own good they endured a bit of trauma. So it will be for us some day. One day we will be able to see clearly, no longer like looking in a dim mirror.

In the meantime we are called to trust and obey, accepting as I am sure the child did on Tuesday while there are things about this life we cannot understand, we have a loving parent who will never leave us to suffer alone, who seeks to hold us close, to comfort us, and to guide us on our way when the suffering is, for at least a while, over.

Having dealt with suffering, Jesus declares the good news of God’s grace. He tells the parable of the fig tree. It is unfortunate so many people see only the judgment and sternness of Jesus in this parable. To be sure there is a call to repentance but we must note not only was a fourth chance offered for fruit to be produced, the gardener pledged to dig the soil and add the manure in hopes the fruit would come. Only after a final fourth year would the ultimate suffering come. We are not told the end of the story. Was there fruit or not? It is as if you and I must decide the ending.

It is up to us. The gardener is ready to dig the soil and to add the nutrients. The grace is there, the love is there, the compassion is there, but we must never take them for granted and we must work diligently to overcome the temptation to waste the good soil of God’s grace and compassion. We must produce fruit. For your sake, for the sake of a suffering world and for the sake of the kingdom of God, let it be so. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.