

## Matthew 27:38-50

Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross." In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, 'I am God's Son.'" The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way. From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

## SERMON: "Why"

When Naomi invited me to be part of this sermon series I was very excited about it. I enjoyed reading the Brian McClaren book *Naked Spirituality*. But when she asked if I would preach on *Why?* I thought, great! ask the guest preacher to address existential crises and explain the nature of suffering and why bad things happen to good people.

And then I heard about the mass shooting in an El Paso Wal-Mart yesterday in which as of last night 20 people had died. And the shooting early this morning in Ohio that killed 9 people. And I remembered the Ft. Hood shooting in 2009. And at the end of the day, and first thing in the morning, this simple word *Why?* that Brian McClaren invited us to consider as a spiritual exercise, becomes that much more real, and necessary, and terribly timely. I guess the question is always timely. Some tragedies hit us more deeply. Some more closely to home. Some in our actual homes and to the people we love the most.

11 years ago I began work as a chaplain for Hospice Austin and I found myself getting to know my new city quickly as I drove all over Austin and out of town. The longer I've worked there the more often I'll be driving around town and realize, "I visited a family down that street once" and I'd remember the people I was privileged to meet at 2am one night. Another day I'll be in another part of town and realize I went down that street too, and met someone else who had just lost someone.

I drive all over town and have had brief glimpses into the lives of my neighbors. I'm truly honored that people invite a stranger to come bless the chaos and desolation,

and love in their lives as they say goodbye to their loved one. I've realized as I drive through this large city that behind every door, there is someone dealing with something: alcoholism, or spending years caring for a sick loved one, or living with an abusive partner, or surviving the loss of a child, or wondering when your mother will be deported, or everyone you love turning their backs on you because of your life choices. Behind every door is someone dealing with something, and even in the age of social media, we often don't have any idea, or know what it is.

So while this latest mass shooting hits me hard this morning, because there are just so so many, and they just keep happening, and we can send astronauts to the moon but why can't we make the shootings stop. Truthfully, sadly, there is never a time when addressing this essential question Why? is not timely. I guess that's why Brian McClaren devoted 2 chapters to it in his book on spiritual practices.

Volumes have been written about why bad things happen to good people... For millenia. We only have to open the book of Psalms to read of countless people of faith shaking their fists at God demanding God show up and for godsake, DO SOMETHING! We only have to read the story of Job to find all our modern explanations for why all these bad things happened to Job, and what he should do about it: clearly, Job, you did something to anger God so just repent and all will be forgiven. Clearly, Job, God is a vengeful God so just curse God and be done with him. And Job in all his grief and illness and righteousness dares to say, NO! I did nothing to deserve this. NO! I did not cause this devastation to come upon me! NO! I refuse to be done with God. But I do demand God account for these actions against me!

We need to read these stories of people shaking their fists at God more often. In church. Because there are people suffering the world over that we have led to believe they should not get angry at God. When our own Scriptures clearly say otherwise. When our own Christ himself has said otherwise.

Asking Why?! is a form of prayer just as much as saying thank you. Demanding God show up and bring justice against our enemies is just as much a right in our prayer life as asking God to bless them. As I looked for scriptures to read this morning, there were many that even this bold guest preacher wasn't willing to read out loud. With children. Or adults. But if you're curious just go read Psalm 88 or 109 or 137.....to name just a few.

Asking why is a prayer we have every right to voice. Doing so doesn't show a lack of faith but absolutely affirms our faith in God. Faith is NOT submissively accepting everything happens for a reason. Let me say that again, Faith is NOT submissively accepting everything happens for a reason. Faith is the trust that the God who shows up in the midst of love and joy and prosperity is the same God who must show up in

devastation and chaos and utter desolation. Doubt is wondering where *is* that God who dealt so kindly with us before, now that there is no one showing kindness to us now. Faith and doubt are not opposites but each full expressions of our utter dependence and need for God.

Asking Why? doesn't often lead to Because. And if Job's friends have taught us anything, we should never answer a suffering friend's Why with Because.... It's not our place to answer a question that only God can answer. And didn't answer, in Job's case, with anything resembling Because... If we stand with a friend who honors us enough to utter this sacred question in our presence, there is one always appropriate response. To sit with them and be quiet. Or as one of my colleagues crudely put it, "Our job is to show up and shut up." Maybe take off our shoes because we are standing on holy ground when this word is uttered. My God my God, why have you forsaken me? We have walked into an intimate and raw prayer, the curtain between heaven and earth has been torn in two, and there is nothing standing between us and God in this moment.

The response to Why is rarely Because. The answer to Why is a search for meaning. Brian McClaren makes a crucial distinction between searching for a reason for this tragedy, and searching for meaning. He says that searching for a reason leads us to look back, to find a cause and effect. We're expecting to draw a straight line between a simple cause to where we are now in the desert. Why did this happen to me? Did God do this to me? Did I do something to cause this? Is it because I needed my faith tested and this is God testing me?

But in stark contrast is searching for meaning. Meaning leads us to look forward to find something good that can come from this destruction. It moves our eyes to see something beyond the desert we're in and imagine a new future. And when we change from searching for a reason--looking back-- to searching for meaning--looking forward--it also changes where God stands in the midst of the tragedy. When we're searching for a reason we see God way back there, letting all this happen to us, or causing it to happen. But when we search for meaning, we find God standing beside us, in the desert, bearing witness to the destruction of our lives, mourning our losses with us, completely and utterly broken. With us. God with us.

When we practice Why spirituality, we come to discover God did not cause this destruction to happen to us, or let it happen, as if to somehow test how much suffering we could endure. When we practice Why spirituality, we see a God who has suffered himself. Who endured the worst taunts himself. Who endured extreme torture himself. Who saw all his friends abandon him in fear, himself. Who died. Himself. This is the God we worship. Who knows our suffering, who shares in our suffering, who grieves our losses because Christ too suffered. *This* is the God standing beside us.

The answer to Why is not because, it's silence. It's presence. It's validation that

yes, everything is, truly lost. The spiritual practice of asking why leads us to search for meaning in the midst of destruction. What good can come from this destruction? What justice can be wrought from the severe injustice I have endured? God asked the prophet Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones, "Can these bones live?" And Ezekiel answered, "Oh lord, you know." Resignation perhaps in his voice. Definitely humility. Definitely a realization that there are never easy answers to life's most difficult questions. Life is not as predictable as plugging numbers into an equation. If you are righteous, good things will come to you. Good things did not come to Jesus in the end who lived a most righteous life. So if we gain little pursuing cause and effect, or a reason for why bad things happen to good people. We are left only with searching for meaning. What can come from this valley of dry bones?

The story of our life as people of faith, is not a simple equation. There will always be many who believe you can just pray your way to cure depression, or that you must have done something wrong to get lung cancer...when you never touched a cigarette in your life. Faith is not an equation. It's a relentless pursuit of asking Why? It's searching for meaning to rise like a phoenix out of the ashes of our broken lives. It's looking to God who didn't cause this to happen, but literally wrote the book on creating meaning and beauty out of chaos and destruction and death.

My favorite creation story is in John and it says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

God who made the heavens and the earth out of nothing is now the God who is crucified on the cross on the very earth God created, by the very people God created. Is the same God standing with us when our valley of dry bones stares back at us. Can these bones live? O God, you know. You who formed the earth out of a formless void, you who created us in our mother's womb, you who died on a cross and was dead for three days, yes, maybe you can breathe new life and meaning into the chaos surrounding me. God who is still creating the heavens and the earth, can create meaning out of our cries of Why.

So how do we practice Why spirituality?

1. First, when you witness tragedy in a friend's life or in the world close to you, remember my friend's wise words: Show up, and shut up. We cannot possibly comprehend the devastation they hold in their hearts. But if we show up we can bear witness to it so much better than a facebook post ever can. We will validate their suffering. And truthfully, all any of us really needs is to be heard. To have our lives be seen. To have our most sacred moments witnessed.

2. Be patient, with others and most of all with yourself. It can take a lot longer than any of us want to find meaning after tragedy. Wait with your friends for it to happen. Remind them, and yourself that God didn't create the world in 7 turns of the earth toward the sun. I'm not an astrophysicist but I'm pretty sure it took a few billion years before there wasn't even an earth turning toward our sun for that measurement of time even to exist. It won't take 4 billion years for something new to come out of the destruction around us, but neither will we see meaning growing overnight. Be patient with them, and yourself, while you wait. Don't rush yourself thinking, I shouldn't still be grieving after this much time! Grief and new life will coexist. Small signs will be evident immediately: Mr. Rogers so eloquently put it, "Look for the helpers. There will always be helpers after a tragedy." The light shines through these helpers showing up. Be patient for the rest.

3. Brian McClaren offered an excellent prayer for us to practice while we wait for meaning to arise. He invites us to pray:

*Why must it be that . . . ? (Describe what has happened.)*

*I had hoped . . . (Articulate the hope that has been dashed or disappointed.)*

*In the middle of this pain, I affirm . . . (What good can you will with God?)*

Why must it be that mass shootings still happen?

I had hoped that we would have found a way to stop them after so so so many of them. In the middle of this pain, I affirm that there are many working together from many backgrounds to find a solution. I affirm there are ways that I too can participate in this process. And I affirm that there are never easy answers to difficult problems.

4. Read the Psalms of Lament. There are many. Hold them in your heart. Memorize one that speaks to you. They give language to our suffering. They validate our suffering. Share them with your friends. They might not have ever known they were tucked away in between all the "happy are those who trust in the Lord" psalms. They are a gift to us from our God and our ancestors of faith who deeply know and understand our suffering.

5. Most of all, ask Why. Ask it often of God. Be bold and shake your fist when tragedy strikes close to your heart. Being angry with God is a gift God gives us just as much as being joyful. Because praying Why will always lead us to discover our God, our suffering God, is always right here with us.

In the name of God who creates us, and God who suffers with us, and God who remains always with us. Amen.