

Dig manure in around the fig tree?? Eeeoooouuwww. Don't they know about e-coli? That could just about shut down the fig industry. People die of e-coli. But maybe that's OK. Maybe they deserve to die because they are sinners. Maybe the Galileans who were slaughtered in the temple by Pilates' henchmen – Pilate was afraid they might be insurrectionists – were great sinners. Maybe the 18,000 children who will die today and tomorrow and the next day of malnutrition and starvation – preventable diseases – will die because their parents should have worked harder, or not sinned. Maybe those people at the Siloam gate were terrible sinners and God put them there just as the car bomb arrived to teach them a lesson.

And Jesus says: REPENT, for pity's sake. Turn around from that way of thinking.

People die because they are mortal.

God's plan is how to live in the grace and presence of God – especially during the most desperate times: an automobile accident, divorce, cancer, war, alcoholism, violence. This world is full of death. // How will you live? Jesus asks. Jesus doesn't answer the superficial questions of the crowd about why people die.

Jesus wants people to know that it is not for humans to call God into question, but for God to call humans into question: How do you live your life?

Paul ran into the same problem with the Corinthians. They were suffering from spiritual superiority. Stop it, Paul warns. One of you is not better than another one of you. You are all the same before God.

Don't test God by being an idolater, // don't desire evil, // live a moral life, // live without complaining.

In other words, God knows if we watch TV and play on the computer more than we read the Bible. God knows if we tithe or not, **and** if we give extra for the Millennium Development Goals. God

knows who we are in our hearts. We need to remember to keep our hearts and minds on the things of God.

Moses turns aside to see what God is up to. Moses was beyond the wilderness –

Moses was moving one way and he turned.

That turning changed his life. Moses met and listened to God. God told Moses that he was the lucky person who would relieve the suffering of the Hebrews in Egypt.

After hemming and hawing quite a bit, Moses asked God: "Who do I tell them you are?"

The response was I AM. A word so holy in Hebrew it has to be whispered YHWH. I AM the God of Abraham, Sarah, Rebecca, Isaac, Jacob and Rachel. I AM with you always.

This brings us back to the suffering in the world. Where is God in the suffering? If God is with us, why does God allow suffering?

Tomes have been written about these questions, and one I can barely scratch the surface of the subject. Perhaps the question needs to be turned around: instead of us calling God into question, how do we live in God's presence, and bring God's presence to a world of sin, suffering, disease, wars, starvation, disasters?

In the parable of the fig tree, the tree had borne no fruit and it was judgment day. In graciousness, the tree was given one more year, and would be nurtured at its roots to accomplish the purpose God had set for it. Earlier in the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist warns people to "Bear fruit worthy of repentance." John preached forgiveness of sins – but forgiveness was a function of the priests in the Temple. Uh-oh

Forgiveness was brought about by sacrifice in the Temple. Uh-oh. For John and then Jesus to proclaim forgiveness apart from the Temple was to deny the temple's role as the essential mediator of forgiveness and thereby, to deny the temple as the place of access to

God. People began to wonder how they would or could live without a blood sacrifice made in the Temple with the proper liturgy and priests.

The priests in Jerusalem were part of the domination system. They would have to change if there was a possibility of forgiveness apart from the expensive Temple worship.

Jesus still calls us to repentance. This turning around asks if we will live in the same old way in a domination system or provide for the less powerful like those without health insurance, decent wages, or green cards.

Repentance seems to have something to do with bearing fruit. In Luke, repentance, turning to a new way, is almost always coupled with the reality of forgiveness of sin. Our sins are forgiven. We can't pay for forgiveness. It comes out of God's immense love for each and every one of us.

In this Lenten season our self-reflection might include meditating how Jesus went to Jerusalem on our behalf. We can't just hang some good fruit on a bad tree and solve anything. We can't just hang some good works on our human lives and solve anything either. The way of the cross demands personal transformation daily.

The parable holds the possibility of fruit bearing in spite of sterility – such as: obeying the law to the nth degree – because that is what is written in stone – but obedience without Love is the sterility Jesus talks about. Like coming to church because it's what we do without examining the motives – oh, I know, it's good for the kids, we've always done this, I have to keep the Sabbath – or are we here to sing our hearts out to praise God because we are forgiven?

Am I here to respond physically and mentally and spiritually to God's forgiveness? How do I orient my heart and life around God's purpose?

I believe God is looking for an habitual habit of heart that wishes and seeks for others well being: strangers, criminals, difficult

neighbors, enemies, politicians, illegal immigrants, those who have better cars than I do, or wear better clothes, or with more talent.

We need to see others as flawed – as we are because I am someone's difficult neighbor, I am someone's enemy, I actually have a better car than some.

But we are/I am forgiven and beloved by God who is.

We can respond positively to God's grace as the fruit tree will respond to a year of TLC – regardless of the odor of the TLC. Thank goodness, grace doesn't come just once. We are able to love more and more as grace is recognized, accepted, recognized and accepted again and again. The receiving of grace is not automatic; it depends on a constant attentiveness and willingness to turn, to listen and to look. This is what Poeman, a desert ascetic, means when he writes: "If Moses had not led his sheep to Midian he would not have seen him who was in the bush." If we don't keep the eyes of our heart open, we will miss opportunities to see and feel God's grace present in our lives – even when we feel abandoned, lost, unworthy and especially in the midst of unexplained suffering around us.

When we live in the presence of God, we change.

When we respond to God's grace, we bear beautiful fruit.

Repentance cannot be composed of "I can" statements. "I have sinned God. I am sorry God, I can do better." Repentance, rather, must be composed of "I can't" statements. "I have sinned, God, I am sorry, God. I've tried and tried and tried but I just don't produce good fruit. I can't seem to do better.

I need your Vinedresser to work on the roots of my life. Give me a new life, God. Give me your life. I can't. You can."

In the Name of God, Amen.