Sunday, June 23, 1996
WHY ME? WHY NOT ME?
Job 1:21; Matthew 5:43-45

Job said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return there; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.” (Job 1:21)

Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:43-45)

“Life is difficult.” This is the opening sentence of one of the best-selling non-fiction books in the last 18 years, The Road Less Traveled by M. Scott Peck.

Here’s how the book begins: “Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult, once we truly understand and accept it, then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.” That’s why Job could say, “The Lord gave, the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord.”

To put it another way, the fact that life is difficult becomes a given. It’s like accepting the fact that the weather changes. It will never be constant or totally to your liking. So whether the sun is shining or the rain is falling, there’s not much you can do about it except to accept it and go about your business as best you can. As Jesus taught, “God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

Fifteen years later, M. Scott Peck wrote a sequel to The Road Less Traveled, titled Further Along the Road Less Traveled. The opening sentence of that book is, “Life is complex.” My suggestion for the opening sentence in a third book, if there is one, would be “Life is unfair.”

In the same way that we accept life’s difficulty and complexity, once we acknowledge that life is unfair, then the fact that life is unfair no longer matters as much.

Here’s a true story about a man named Gerald that illustrates what I’m talking about. One day, an auto accident took the lives of Gerald’s wife, his four-year-old daughter, and his mother. Following the accident, people kept asking him, “Why you?” One person commented, “Your family seemed so ideal. This tragedy is a terrible injustice. If it can happen to you, it can happen to any of us. Now no one is safe.”

As Gerald thought about it, he agreed. No one is safe because the universe is often unpredictable and unjust. Loss has little to do with our notions of fairness. Some people live long, safe lives even though it seems they deserve to suffer, while others endure loss after loss, even though it seems they deserve to be blessed. Loss is no more a respecter of persons than good fortune is. Life is filled with both good luck and bad luck.

By a strange coincidence, two weeks before the tragic accident that claimed his wife, daughter, and mother, Gerald and his wife Lynda had had a long conversation about what each would do if the other were to die. They talked about how they would raise the children and what they would find most difficult about being single parents. They also discussed remarriage, agreeing

that while two parents in the home are ideal, circumstances are rarely ideal. Lynda joked, “According to what I know about statistics, there would be no eligible men available to marry me. And according to what I know about you, there would be no women crazy enough to marry you.” Gerald was now left with three children to raise on his own.

After the accident, Gerald asked, “Why me? Why did this happen to me and our children? Why now, in the prime of life?”

Most of us want to have control over our lives. And in many ways, we do, particularly in our modern, Western civilization where we can achieve so much. But when we lose that control, we become more vulnerable to disappointment.

Bad luck, unexplained loss, deprives us of control. Cancer rages, violence erupts, accidents occur, death strikes — often without warning. Suddenly, we’re forced to face our limitations. Our expectations explode, and we ask, “Why me?”

But then, ask yourself the opposite question: “Why not me?” It often helps to turn questions around. For example, instead of just asking, “Why is there so much evil in the world?” it helps to also ask, “Why is there so much good in the world?”

“Why me? Why not me?” It’s not a fatalistic question. One man, after losing his wife to cancer, reflected on the question. They had been married for 30 years, raised children, served their community, and enjoyed many happy times together. Now it was time to experience another side of life — the painful side. He realized that he could no more explain why his life had been good than he could explain why it had turned bad.

Did you choose to be born into a stable, loving family? Did you choose to be born in this country? Did you determine your height, weight, or intelligence? Much of life just happens; it is beyond our control. “Why not me?” is as valid a question as “Why me?”

The former Soviet Union lost nearly 20 million people during World War II. Millions more died in Stalin’s purges. Countless people worldwide live under conditions of deprivation, never seeing prosperity. In some inner cities, violence and addiction are so common that they’re as normal to young people as green lawns are to us in more affluent areas. Millions endure abuse. “Why me?” is one question, but “Why not me?” is just as valid.

Gerald, after losing his family members, realized that he had been initiated into a fellowship of suffering that spans the world. His tragedy introduced him to a side of life that most people around the world know too well. Yet, as he reflected on it, he realized how fortunate he still was. He had a wonderful community, a secure job, and flexible hours. He had people to help at home, enabling him to be a good parent to his remaining children. Most importantly, he had his strong Christian faith to draw on.

People thought of him as heroic, but Gerald said he was only doing what people have done for centuries — making the best of a bad situation. He asked, “Why not me? Can I expect to live an entire life free of disappointment and suffering? Free of loss and pain? The very expectation is not only unrealistic but arrogant. God spare me from such a perfect life.”

Most of us want life to be fair. When we suffer loss, we claim our right to justice and resent the unfairness. We want a world where virtue is rewarded, vice is punished, hard work succeeds, and decency wins. When it doesn’t, we feel violated.

Gerald didn't believe he deserved to lose his family, but he also realized he didn't necessarily deserve their presence in his life either. "Perhaps I didn't deserve their deaths," he said, "but I didn't deserve their presence in my life either."

A perfectly fair world may seem appealing, but a deeper reflection shows us the problem with that desire. In such a world, we might never experience tragedy, but neither would we experience grace, which is only grace when it's undeserved. Love is only love when it's unconditional.

Ever since reading Gerald's story, I've asked people, "Do you think life is unfair?" Everyone has answered, "Yes." Then I ask, "Would you want to live in a world that was one hundred percent fair, where you got exactly what you deserved?" No one has said yes.

Gerald came to the same conclusion. He said, "I would prefer to take my chances living in a universe where I get what I don't deserve, both the bad and the good. That means I will suffer loss, but it also means I will receive mercy. I dread pain, but it's worth it if I can experience undeserved grace."

Gerald continued, "If I've learned anything, it's that I desperately need God's grace. Grace comes in unexpected ways. Friends have been loyal and supportive, despite my struggles. Contentment and simplicity have found a place in my soul, even though I've never been busier."

He concluded, "Despite being a Christian for years, since the accident, God has become a living reality to me as never before. My confidence in God is quieter but stronger. I feel little pressure to impress or prove myself to God, but I want to serve God with all my heart. My life is full of bounty, even as I feel the pain of loss. To live in a world with grace is better by far than to live in a world of absolute fairness. A fair world might make life nice, but only as nice as we are. In a world with grace, we get life, even in our suffering." Amen.