Brok 32

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 the sun to 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 title of the book is--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 today, 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 as possible and to remember as Jesus taught, "God makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

Fifteen years later M. Scott Peck wrote the sequel to THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED, the title of the book is, FURTHER ALONG THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED, and the opening sentence of that book is, "Life is complex." My suggestion for the opening sentence in his third book in the series, if there is one, is "Life is unfair."

In the same as accepting the fact that life is diffi-

cult and that life is complex, once we acknowledge the truth 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 which illustrates what I am 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 appeared 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 hardly a safe place. It is often mean, unpredictable and unjust. Loss has little to do with our notions of fairness. Some

people live long, safe lives even though from our point of view they deserve to suffer. Others endure one loss after another, though it seems to us they deserve to be blessed. Loss is no more a respecter of persons and position than good fortune is. Life is filled with good luck and bad luck.

By a strange coincidence, two weeks before the tragic accident Gerald's wife, four-year old daughter and mother, Gerald and his wife Lynda had had a long conversation about what each would do if one 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 talked about remarriage and both

agreed that under ideal conditions having two parents in the home is best. But conditions are rarely ideal, which made them cautious about assuming whether another spouse could be found. In addition, Lynda said, "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." Before one child was killed in the accident with Lynda, there were four children so now Gerald was left with three to raise on his own.

Following the accident, Gerald kept asking, "Why me? Why did the loss happen to me and our other three children? Why at such a young age? Why after trying so hard to keep the marriage together? Why in the prime of life?"

Most of us want to have control over our lives. And we succeed to a large degree most of the time, which is due in part to the growing powers we have at our disposal in Western civilization. Because we are able to obtain so much of what we want, the possibility of that much control makes us more vulnerable to disappointment when we lose it.

Bad luck, unexplained loss, deprives us of control. Cancer rages, violence erupts, divorce devastates, accidents occur, death strikes--often with little or no warning. Suddenly we are forced to face our limitations squarely. Our expectations blow up in our face. "Why me?" we ask.

On the other hand, ask yourself the opposite question, "Why not me?" It often helps to turn

questions around. For example, in addition to 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 said he asked, "Why not me?" after his wife died of cancer. Then after much thought he arrived at the conclusion that suffering is a part of life. They had been married for 30 years, raised their children, served their community, and enjoyed many happy times together. Then the time came to experience another side of life, the darker and more painful side.

He said that he could no longer explain why his life had turned bad than he could explain why his life had been so good up to that point. Did he

choose to be born into a loving, stable family? Did you choose to be born in this country and therefore you are automatically a United States citizen? Did you determine your height, weight, intelligence and other physical and mental capabilities? Are you better than some baby born to a poor family in Bangladesh? Much of life seems to just happen: it is beyond our control. "Why not me?" is as valid a question as "Why me?" it can help you gain perspective.

The former Soviet Union lost nearly 20 million people during World War II, and on top of that Stalin exterminated millions more in the 1930's. Virtually every family was touched by death. Hundreds of millions of people on this planet live under conditions of such deprivation that they rarely see prosperity, to say nothing of experienc-

ing it. Young people growing up in many inner cities witness violence and drug addiction so often that it is as common to them as green lawns and friendly neighbors are to most of us who live in Lincoln. Millions of people endure abuse of one kind or another. "Why me?" is one question, but "Why not me?" is just as valid a question.

Gerald, the man I mentioned earlier who lost his wife, his four-year old daughter and his mother in an auto accident said that he soon realized after the accident 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 all too well. In fact, he said, as he thought about it, he hardly qualifies, considering the good life he has been

privileged to live for so many years and even today. He still has a great deal of control. He lives in a wonderful community of people. He has a secure job with flexible hours and good benefits. He has been able to find people to employ at home so that he can be a good parent to his three remaining children. He has a strong Christian faith from which to draw strength and wisdom.

He said that many people think of him as heroic, but he has only done what people around the world have been doing for centuries--make the most of a bad situation. So he said, "Why not me? Can I expect to live an entire lifetime free of disappointment and suffering? Free of loss and pain? The very expectation strikes me as not only unrealistic but also arrogant. God spare me

from such a perfect life."

Isn't it the case that most of us want life not only to be under our control but also to be fair. So when we suffer loss, we claim our right to justice and resent circumstances that get in the way. We want to live in a society in which virtue is rewarded and vice punished, where hard work succeeds and laziness fails, where decency wins and meanness loses. We feel violated when life does not turn out that way, when we get what we do not deserve and do not get what we feel we do deserve.

Gerald did not believe for a moment that in the accident that killed his wife, daughter and mother, he got what he deserved. He know he is not perfect and never will be, but he said, "I am cer-

tainly no worse and maybe even better than some other people who seem to have it all. The explanation that people always prosper according to their merits is too simple, for it does not square with human experience.

Here's a mother of four children, a woman not yet 40, whose husband recently died in an airplane crash. She is the epitome of goodness, kindness and honesty, as was her husband. What did she do to deserve such a loss? Here's another woman, close to 80, who neglected and abused her three children while they were growing up, divorced two men because she was tired of being married to them, smokes and drinks constantly, and yet has good health, financial security and many friends. What has she done to deserve such a blessing?

To make matters worse in Gerald's story, eight months after the accident, the alleged driver of the other car which caused the accident which killed his wife, daughter and mother, was tried in court on four counts of vehicular manslaughter. Gerald was a witness for the prosecution which meant he once again had to face the man he had met on the road shortly after the accident. He said that he was so nervous while going to court that he got sick. He did not want revenge but did want justice so that the man he considered responsible for deaths of three members of his family would pay the just penalty for his wrongdoing.

The prosecution was confident of victory. But the defense attorney argued that no one could actually prove that the accused had been driving the

car, since both he and his wife had been thrown from the vehicle and the wife died instantly.

So the burden of proof was on the prosecution. A witness saw the accused get into the driver's seat only ten minutes before the accident happened. Other witnesses heard the accused admit after the accident that he was driving the car. But the defense attorney was able to cast enough suspicion on the testimony of these witnesses to gain an acquittal for his client.

Gerald was enraged after the trial. It was as unjust and unfair as the accident itself. The driver did not get what he deserved any more than the victims, living or dead, had gotten what they deserved.

However the more Gerald thought about it, the more he began to be bothered by the assumption that he had a right to complete fairness. He said, "Granted, I did not deserve to lose three members of my family. But then again, I am not sure I deserved to have them in the first place. Lynda was a woman of superior qualities and she loved me through some very hard times. My mother lived well and served people to her life's end, and she showed a rare sensitivity to me during my rebellious teenage years. Diana Jane sparkled with enthusiasm for life and helped to fill our home with noise and excitement. Perhaps I did not deserve their deaths; but I did not deserve their presence in my life either."

"Living in a perfectly fair world appeals to me. But deeper reflection makes me wonder. In such

a world I might never experience tragedy; but neither would I experience grace, especially the grace God gave me in the form of the three wonderful people whom I lost."

The problem of expecting to live in a perfectly fair world is that there is no grace in that world, for grace is grace only when it is undeserved. In the same way, love is love only when it is unconditional and cannot be earned.

Ever since reading Gerald's story, I've been asking people, "Do you think life is unfair?" Everyone thus far has answered, "Yes." Then I ask, "Would you want to live in a world that was completely, one-hundred percent fair so that you got everything you deserved?" No one yet after thinking about it has answered, "Yes."

Gerald came to the same conclusion. Let his words speak to you as they have to me. He said, "I would prefer to take my chances living in a universe in which I get what I do not deserve--again either way. That means I will suffer loss, as I already have, but it also means I will receive mercy. Life will end up being far worse than it would have been otherwise; it will also end up being far better. I will have to endure the bad I do not deserve; I will also get the good I do not deserve. I dread experiencing pain, but it is worth it to me if I can also experience undeserved grace."

And then Gerald added: "If I have learned anything over the past three years, it is that I desperately need the grace of God. Grace comes to me in ways I did not expect. Friends have re-

mained loyal and supportive, in spite of my struggles. Quietness, contentment and simplicity have gradually found a place in the center of my soul, though I have never been busier."

"Despite the fact that I have been a Christian for many years before the accident, since then God has become a living reality to me as never before. My confidence in God is somehow quieter but stronger. I feel little pressure to impress God or prove myself to God; yet I want to serve God with all my heart and strength. My life is full of bounty even as I continue to 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 for us, but only as

nice as we are. We might get what we deserve, but I wonder how much that is and whether or not we would really be satisfied. A world with grace will give us more than we deserve. It will give us life, even in our suffering." Amen.