

Why Bad Things Happen To Good Churches – And People

This past Sunday was our Annual Congregation Meeting. For insight into both our life together as a church family and our lives as individuals, we studied John 15:1-8.

1. Warm up question. What has been the best year in your life so far?
2. Jeff asserted that last year was probably the best year ever in the life of our church. That seems counterintuitive since last year was tough. For the first time in 20 years, we saw a noticeable decline in attendance. Although attendance already seems to be bouncing back, last year was scary. Life is like that. Tough times are inevitable. And when tough times come, many of us find ourselves thinking, “What have I done to deserve this? I must have done something wrong, and God is punishing me.”
 - a. When you experience hardship in life, do you often find yourself thinking that God is punishing you? Why or why not?
 - b. Think back to the hardest year of your life so far. At the time, how did you frame the experience in your mind? In other words, what theory did you embrace at the time for why you were experiencing so much hardship?
3. Read John 15:1-8. In this passage, Jesus invites us to picture spiritual life as being like a grapevine. In this analogy, Jesus is the trunk of the vine, we are the branches, and God is the farmer that tends the vine. Two kinds of branches are mentioned: those that bear fruit and those that bear none. Jeff focused on what happens to the fruitful branches. Before turning there, though, let’s explore the rest of the passage.
 - a. In verse 4, Jesus exhorts us to abide in him like a branch abides in the vine. What do you think that means? What does it look like to “abide in Jesus”?
 - b. In verses 2 and 6, Jesus says that branches that bear no fruit get removed, wither, and are eventually burned. What do you think we’re supposed to learn from that? What does it mean to be a fruitless Christian – and what are the consequences?
 - c. Does verse 7 mean we can get whatever we ask for? If not, what does it mean?
4. On Sunday, we focused on verse 2: “Every branch that bears fruit God prunes to make it bear more fruit.” This seems counterintuitive. If we’re bearing fruit, you’d think God would leave us alone. Instead, God often pulls out the pruning shears and cuts us back, so we can bear even more fruit. This raises the possibility that when hard times come, it’s not because we’ve done something bad, but because we’ve done something good, and God is seeking to spur our growth and maximize our potential.
 - a. How do you feel about that? Does it ring true to you or not?
 - b. Think about a really hard time in your life. How do you think it affected you? Did it make you stronger and better? If so, how?

5. Life is complicated and there's no one-size-fits-all answer to why bad things happen. There are a variety of possible causal factors:

- Sometimes we bring it on ourselves (sowing and reaping).
- Sometimes others do it to us in a careless exercise of their freewill.
- Sometimes it may be loving discipline/correction from God.
- Sometimes there may seem to be no logical explanation.
- And sometimes, as John 15 suggests, God may lead us through hard times to grow us stronger and better.

a. Do you take issue with any of these causal factors as a possible valid explanation for hard times?

b. Given the range of possible explanations for hard times, how are we ever supposed to figure out the cause of hardship in any particular situation?

c. Jeff suggested that regardless of cause, hard times can almost always be a pruning force that enables us to grow stronger and better if we respond with hope and optimism instead of despair and fatalism. Do you buy that? Why or why not?

d. Speaking about the anxiety that many are feeling about the political state of affairs in the U.S. and growing fear of those who are different, Valerie Kaur points to the grassroots activism that seems to be arising in response, and says, "I see the darkness. But the mother in me has to ask: What if this is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb? What does the midwife tell us to do? Breathe! And then? Push! Because if we don't push, we will die. [But if we push, we have the potential to birth something new and wonderful.]" On a scale of 1 to 10, how worried – or not – are you about the present state of affairs in America – and why? For those who are worried, what do you think is the best way to respond?

6. Applying Jesus' pruning principle to our church, Jeff said hindsight already helps us see that last year, though difficult, was an important incubation period ("the darkness of the womb") for several powerful positive developments now being birthed in our church, so that the pain of a tough year may well give birth to incredible good as we move forward. He cited a couple examples.

a. We seem to be experiencing a worship resurgence that is pumping energy into the entire body of our church. Do you sense that?

b. We are also now launching an outreach resurgence. Extensive surveying of our congregation by the Local Outreach Board identified three centers of ministry passion in our congregation: (1) LGBT youth; (2) immigrants and refugees; and (3) systemic poverty and racism. We'll soon be launching active ministries in these three areas to share the love of God in concrete, hands-on ways. How do you feel about that?