This is the second of three weeks where we at Allison Creek are focusing on stewardship. In a little while we will hear a minute for mission on stewardship and how we are to be good stewards of what we have. I think the Scriptures we are reading this morning focus on one aspect of stewardship.

The first Scripture that Mike read is rooted in an Old Testament theology about how God wants us to respond to those around us in need. I thought it important to read a portion of the Old Testament background to the New Testament gospel lesson from Mark. I am first going to read from Leviticus 19: 9-14.

This passage from Leviticus includes words of instruction to the Israelite priests about what the Israelites need to do to live holy lives in the Promised Land that they are moving into. These words which I am about to read come from a section discussing moral and ethical laws, what to do on holy days, and rules on animal sacrifice.

**Read Leviticus 19: 9-14**

The second Scripture I am going to read was also read last week and it will also be read next week. This Scripture is the Scripture which is guiding our stewardship emphasis this year. This is the Scripture which comes right after the Scripture that Mike read.

**Read Mark 12: 38-44**

As we all know, this week there was a major natural disaster hitting the shores of the Northeast. In fact, our new friend in Liberia, Pastor Peter Breeze, called me this week to check on us here at Allison Creek to see if we were OK. Know that we have some prayer warriors in Africa who are praying quite a bit for this congregation now.

Anyway, whenever a natural disaster hits the shores of the United States, we always have preachers who want to make a direct cause and effect interpretation of the event. The preacher on TV who says that Haiti was hit by a natural disaster because of some pact that was made with the devil and New Orleans because of a permissive culture or Mississippi or New Jersey because they have organized gambling.

But in reading through the 12th chapter of Mark over the past couple of weeks and into next week, I wonder if there is a different way to interpret natural disasters or natural events that we see in the world? I wonder if the question we should be asking is not “why did God cause this event to happen?” When we ask that question we allow people who don’t know very much to come up with the most silly of answers where someone or some group is blamed. I wonder if there is a different question that we should be asking instead.

In the text we just read, one of the scribes or synagogue leaders comes up to Jesus and asks him which commandment is the first of all. Mark records this question coming from a scribe but two of the other gospels have a slightly different bend on this question. The gospel writer Luke records a similar question coming from a lawyer and Luke then follows this question with Jesus telling the story of the Good Samaritan. A story in which a foreigner becomes the hero and Luke challenges his community about where to look for God’s activity.

The gospel writer Matthew records this question about which is the greatest commandment coming from a Pharisee wanting to justify his version of Judaism. But Mark tells his gospel account in a way that he follows this question about the greatest commandment with a story about a poor woman who puts in two small copper coins. Jesus looks to her as an example that God did not abandon this woman but that God uses this woman to show faith to others.

Whenever a natural disaster happens, some folks want a quick and rational answer to explain why this particular event happened. Usually, like in the book of Job, people try to rationalize that the person or people afflicted must have done something to deserve what happened to them.

How many folks have looked to the misfortune of another and thought to themselves, what must they have done to deserve what they got? Or how many folks have looked at their own tragedy and blamed themselves or others?

Hurricane Sandy has now swept through the Northeast. Some of us are originally from the Northeast, obviously not me, and some of us have relatives living in the Northeast. Rather than asking, “Why did God cause this natural disaster?” or attempting to answer that question by saying, “God caused this natural disaster because …… and you then fill in the blank with whatever you think is sinful and against God’s will.” Just like there will be people who will quickly decide what God’s will is based on who wins the presidential election on Tuesday.

But I wonder if there is a different question we could ask than “why did God cause this” or answer that question with an answer that shows a shallow theology. I wonder if instead when we come in contact with something that may be called by some a natural disaster or a tragedy, I wonder if instead we ask, “How would God want me to respond to what I am seeing? What is the example that Jesus set about how to respond to so called tragedies that we see?

I end with a story. It is not a story about a hurricane. It is the story of a special needs teenager.

In the desert town of Queen Creek, Ariz., high school bullies were throwing trash at sophomore Chy Johnson. Calling her "stupid." Pushing her in the halls. Chy's brain works at only a third-grade level because of a genetic birth defect, but she knows enough to feel hate.

"She'd come home every night at the start of the school year crying and upset," says her mom, Liz Johnson. "That permanent smile she had, that gleam in her eye, that was all gone."

Her mom says she tried to talk to teachers and administrators and got nowhere. So she tried a whole new path -- the starting quarterback of the undefeated football team. After all, senior Carson Jones had once escorted Chy to the Special Olympics.

"Just keep your ear to the ground," Liz wrote to Carson on his Facebook page. "Maybe get me some names of who is bullying my daughter?"

But Carson Jones did something better than that. Instead of ratting other kids out, he decided to take one in -- Chy. He started asking her to eat at the cool kids' lunch table with him and his teammates. "I just thought that if they saw her with us every day, maybe they'd start treating her better," Carson says. "Telling on kids would've just caused more problems."

It got better. Starting running back Tucker Workman made sure somebody was walking between classes with Chy. In classes, cornerback Colton Moore made sure she sat in the row right behind the team. And the best thing is? The football players didn't tell anybody. They just did it.

All of a sudden, Chy started coming home as her bubbly self again. When her mom asked why she was so happy, she said, "I'm eating lunch with my boys!"

Nobody knows how far Chy Johnson will go in life. The life expectancy of those afflicted with her disease, microcephaly, is only 25-30 years. But her sophomore year, so far, has been unforgettable.

Carson is a senior this year. He will be graduating as well as most of his friends of the football team. Not to worry. Carson has a little brother on the team, Curtis, who's in Chy's class.

"Mom," he announced at the dinner table the other night, "I’ve got Chi’s back."

So when we encounter natural disasters. When we encounter families who face tragedy. When we encounter people who have been dealt a tough hand. The question may not be, “why did God cause this?”

The question may be, “what can I do for my neighbor in need.” AMEN.

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-Reilly, Rick, “Special Team,” and found at <http://espn.go.com/espn/story/_/id/8579599/chy-johnson-boys>

-Given: November 4, 2012 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)