

Questions & Bad Theology

Luke 13:1-5; John 9:1-3

February 5, 2017

One of the most powerful and moving miracle stories involving Jesus is found in John's Gospel. And while we stopped today's scripture reading at verse 3, the story itself continues with Jesus spitting on the ground to make mud, placing that mud over the blind man's eyes and once it was washed away, he could see. Finding this story in the middle of this Book seems a bit strange to me, when considering we are taught to lead off with a powerful story because that will grab the audiences attention. In fact, I spend a lot of time each week searching for something that will increase my chances of grabbing your attention when I start. Here, though, John waits until the middle before telling about Jesus' healing of a man born blind.

Behind this miracle story, though, assumptions have been made by Jesus' Disciples, and those assumptions are clearly seen in their question: [Read John 9:2] "His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'" While today this question might seem cold and ill-informed, it is important to know that during that time, a child born with a disability, or any person with a disability, was believed to be disabled because of some sin they committed or because of some sin their parents committed before they were even born. It is universally believed that this understanding of disabilities, more particularly, being born with a disability is the reason the Disciples following Jesus asked this question. Luckily for all of us, Jesus dispels this notion of "cause and effect" theology, yet it seems without even spending much time looking, this cause and effect theology remains today.

The simple truth is every time some disaster or misfortune strikes, someone will be quick to question "why" the bad thing happened in the first place. Often, they are looking for someone to blame or some way to explain it. Some have noted how the 9/11 attacks were "God's judgment on America." Or how about Pat Robertson's response to the January 2010 earthquake that devastated Haiti and its people. Sadly this former Southern Baptist Minister who advocates what he calls conservative Christian ideals saw it fitting to proclaim that "the people of Haiti were paying the penalty for the sins of their ancestors."

My Brothers and Sisters, if we take the Bible seriously, there is simply no way to connect the dots like that. With no disrespect to Mr. Robertson, such a statement is simply bad theology and bad theology abounds in our world. We find it on TV, in movies, in books, in music...and even in the church.

Most of us know all too well how difficult it is to handle and deal with hardships. Then there are some of us who know how much harder those situations become when people say God is doing it to us because we have sinned. Now I am not claiming that the Disciples were mean spirited, or had any ill-will toward the blind man, in fact I read their question as a rather innocent one, especially knowing something about their cultural context. Whether they would believe that he deserved it outside of that context is

unknown, but it is precisely because of that context that they wanted to know whose actions caused his disability, and like all of us who seek intellectual understanding, they approached Jesus with this cause and effect question.

What is it with questions? They baffle some, they confuse others, they even anger people, and at times an angry response is probably warranted. Like those who attempt to hide an insult by including it in a question. Or those who seek to manipulate others by claiming to only ask questions, when really, they are leading someone down a path of their own choosing.

There are times, however, when questions are positive and helpful. For instance, some teachers and presenters love the interaction that occurs when questions are asked and answers are given. I, for one, have always loved teaching, presenting and learning in that kind of environment. For me, when everyone involved is committed, kind and loving toward other people in a group, questions allow for greater exploration of issues. In this way, we need those who have questions to feel comfortable enough to ask them. Sadly, this is not always the case because no matter how often we say “the only dumb question is the one not asked” there have been times when I have felt a lot dumber for having asked the question than I ever would have felt if I had remained silent.

FBC Wilmington Baptism

Years ago we were spending the weekend in Wilmington with Amy’s family. Her father was still serving as Senior Pastor of FBC Wilmington which meant I was excited to be able to hear him preach that Sunday. On this particular Sunday Mike’s worship began with 2 baptisms. One, a young girl in middle school. The other, a man who looked to be in his late 40’s. After baptizing the young girl, she left the baptistry and the man entered. As he entered, I heard people around me begin to sniffle, but then the sniffles began spreading around the congregation. Now, there are times when baptism itself can justify an emotional reaction like the one I was witnessing, but I knew something else was going on, but since this was at the very beginning of the service I had to wait over an hour to find out.

At lunch later that day, Amy and I both wanted to know what all of the crying was all about. Now friends, this was about 10 years ago, but I can still remember this like it was yesterday, and I know we all have stories like that.

Come to find out, this man owned a Dump Truck business and every Friday he would pick his 10 year old son up from school in the dump truck. Together they would take his last load of the day to the dump. They had done this a countless number of times.

I have zero experience with dump trucks, but I am told that after the initial dumping of the contents in the box, the truck will do one final lurch so all of the small debris remaining will loosen and fall out. Well after securing the truck, the dad stepped out of the cab to check the box to see if that final lurch was needed, while the son, as usual stayed in the cab. Just as the father reached the back of the truck it lurched causing his

son to accidentally bump the gear shift. As you would expect, panic set in but the dad was able to jump back into the cab and stop the truck so quickly that it actually did not complete a full rotation of the tires.

After stopping it the dad realized his son was not in the cab and he jumped out and called his son's name. Not hearing a response he yelled louder and louder, all the while walking around the truck, and then he reached a corner of the truck and saw his son's body laying on the ground underneath one of the truck's wheels. The 10 year old boy, his son was dead in one of the most gut wrenching accidents I have ever heard of and on that particular Friday, this man experienced something no parent should ever experience. The death of their child.

This back story is so important because it was only a couple of months after that, that he was standing in the baptismal waters with my father-in-law professing his faith. So I asked Mike, how does someone experience something so tragic and then months later decide to openly profess faith. Mike said I don't know, but I can tell you what he told me... a family member of his, who by the way is also a minister, told him that God did this because the Dad didn't live a "good life" for all those years before, but that is not why he wanted Mike to baptize him.

Mike went on to say that this man came to him wondering if Mike thought God did this like the other minister said, and it was Mike's response that led the Dad to those baptismal waters that day. Mike shared with this dad that God loves all of creation without condition. God wants us all to experience that love, and never ever tries to shame us, or manipulate us into seeking. Lastly Mike told this grieving Dad that he had no idea why his son died, and he would not ever want to suggest that he knew why that happened, but he did no one thing and that is the God who Mike worships would never do something like that to anyone.

It was only weeks after that conversation that Mike received a call from the Dad letting him know that he wanted Mike to baptize him. That Dad also made sure Mike knew that he was the very first minister to ever have the courage to say he didn't know why tragedies happen. Throughout this man's life, ministers, even relatives who happened to be ministers, told him that the bad things, the tragedies if you will, were his fault. That he brought it on himself and that God was getting back at him for the "bad choices" he had made at some time earlier. He had heard things like, "God's trying to tell you that you need to make better choices."

Mike had the courage to be honest with this grieving Dad in a way that opened the door to a new understanding of himself and of God. It is so hard for us to say we don't know, especially for those more logically inclined. If everything must have a cause and effect, then saying I don't know is virtually impossible.

This cause and effect thinking happened in Jesus' day too. The two stories in our texts today illustrate that people have always tried to "make sense" or intellectually understand the bad stuff of life. Where Luke told of a group wondering if some Galileans had been

killed and had their blood co-mingled with their animal sacrifices because of their sin, John's Gospel brings us the Disciples asking Jesus if a man's blindness was because of his sin or his parents sin. "Neither" was Jesus' answer. God did not *cause* the man's blindness...but God could no doubt work with and through this blind man so that God would be revealed.

The Bad theology that Jesus had to confront is still with us today. It comes from manipulative preachers and "pop" psychologists like Dr. Phil. It comes from country music songs and the theological cesspool of the internet. It comes from our own life experience and our thin and flawed lines of reasoning. And it leaves us confused.

We tend to cling to the idea that everything happens for a reason, which causes us to say or hear things like "you are experiencing this suffering because you did _____". It seems to me that we must steer clear of always placing the reason for our suffering on God. God loves all of us so much that God limits God's self and entrusts us with free-will. And while we may not like it during our times of suffering, we tend to crave it at all other times.

The truth is that most of us are more secure with rules and absolutes than we are with faith and mystery. We really do want answers to our questions... and we want them now! But as theologian and Church Historian, and my former professor, Dr. Bill Leonard, says, "Some questions still aren't answered, but faith is possible nonetheless."

For me it comes down to 2 things: trust and the willingness to embrace the mystery and I believe Jesus said as much. Instead of making sense of it all, he led the disciples to consider the mystery. The journey of faith is not about getting all of your questions answered...as though that is even possible...or even that it is God's desire for you. It is about yielding your heart, mind and soul to God a little more each day.

So be careful about the theology you claim. Whether it is some easy, throw-away line from a movie, the simple lyric of a sentimental song, the feel good theology from a talk show host, or even the sure fire answers of a TV preacher who will never hold your hand and pray with you...be careful of the voices you are willing to listen to. Bad theology abounds...but it is not the theology of this book, and never has been.

And that is the good news...and that is The Gospel for this day.

AMEN!