

## A Question of Blame—or Not, Lent 3-C, Luke 13:1-9

You have to be careful when you ask Jesus a question; he may take the conversation in a direction you don't expect. That's the case in today's gospel lesson. The horrific headline that day was that Pilate had butchered a group of Galileans and, in a show of contempt for their faith, mixed their blood with their sacrifices. Some in the crowd ask Jesus to comment and the implied question seems to be, "Why these people, what did they do to deserve such an awful fate?"

On one level this is a perfectly reasonable question. It's the one all of us ask at one time or another when confronted by what seems to be random suffering. It's the question we ask when a tsunami washes away thousands of people, when cancer claims a young mother, when a drunk walks away from the accident which killed everyone in the other car. It is the eternal question which consumes the book of Job: Why do bad things happen to good people? Is there any explanation for how evil is apportioned?

We ask the question because we desperately want to believe there is some moral order in the universe, that there is a reason for even the most terrible events. We ask the question because the alternative is just too terrifying, that life finally has no meaning and we are no more than leaves violently blown by whatever wind arises. So we probe for a simple cause and effect. If we can explain why suffering came to this person and not another, the world is not quite so scary.

So desperate are we for an explanation that we sometimes embrace truly bad theology. In time of crisis you will hear awkward comforters glibly say, "This is all part of God's plan" or "Everything happens for a reason"—as though it is any great consolation to imagine God as a cosmic puppet master, causing suffering for some so that others may learn a hidden lesson or find a new path.

In times of pain it is perfectly normal to ask the question of "why," but there is also a dark side to trying to establish suffering's often obscure cause. When we are hurting we easily move from looking for meaning to assigning blame; "I am in pain and someone or something **must** be responsible." Brené Brown, a researcher on the phenomenon of shame writes, "Blame is simply the discharging of pain and discomfort. We blame when we're uncomfortable and experiencing pain—when we're vulnerable, angry, hurt, in shame, grieving. There is nothing productive about blame."

There is a difference between asking why we are suffering and trying to assign blame. Blame looks for scapegoats. Blame says that some people deserve their suffering. Blame is what creates barriers between the innocent "us" and the guilty "them." Blame is what we do to distance ourselves from others and their pain by telling ourselves that they somehow deserve their fate. Blame is what allows us to say some are hungry and cold because they are lazy, that those who struggle with addiction are just weak, that rural America is dying because the rubes who live there are tied to the past. Blame is the way we let ourselves off the hook from being engaged with those we might help. Blame is the poison which makes it so hard for us to have a civil

political discussion. The internal script we repeat is the same in many contexts, “If only he, she, or they had not done x, y, or z, they would not be suffering. It’s their own fault.”

Evidently Jesus senses that his questioners are more interested in assigning blame than pondering the mystery of suffering because he rejects the whole idea that pain is perfectly apportioned or always deserved. “Do you think those Galileans were worse than others? No way! And those 18 who died when the tower of Siloam fell, were they particularly evil and deserving of death? They were not! Let me tell you, unless you get a new attitude and realize that each of you is in need of God you are in trouble.” The point, says Jesus, is not to decide who deserves to suffer but to recognize that you are in the same boat with those with whom you feel little kinship. Like them you are dependent on the mercy of God in every moment. If you follow me, he suggests, you will spend less time worrying about who deserves pain and a lot more trying to be like God, working to ease suffering wherever you find it.

To drive his point home Jesus tells them a parable. A man owned a vineyard and in that vineyard was a fig tree which had been barren for three years. “There’s no reason to let it take up valuable space,” he thought, “let’s just cut it down.” But the gardener offers an alternative, “Let me work with it a little—loosen up the soil, mix in some manure—and see if we can make it bloom.”

This parable is open to more than one interpretation, but at the heart of all of them is the incredible patience of God. We are quick to judge, God is not. When we dismiss others as hopelessly stupid or wicked, God sees what they can be. When we are quick to abandon others to what we see to be the consequences of their own folly, God longs to give them one more chance....And God calls us to be equally full of gracious care, to be the ones willing to get a little manure on our hands if it might mean turning another person’s life around.

Beth Macy’s book, *Dopesick*, should be required reading for anyone who is concerned about the current opioid crisis, and particularly for those of us who live in Virginia. In painful detail she lays out how the crisis has affected the coal fields of far Southwest Virginia, the affluent suburbs of Roanoke, and small towns in the Shenandoah Valley. A theme which recurs throughout the book is that we are quick to judge addicts instead of understanding the pain which keeps them enslaved. It is wrong, Macy argues, to see addicts as criminal losers seeking cheap bliss; most just want to avoid the agony of withdrawal. They don’t want to be dopesick. At a lecture given at Roanoke College, Macy was asked, “What is the solution to the crisis?” Quoting one of the people she interviewed for her book she said, “It is community, realizing that we are all in this together.”

Asking if addicts deserve their fate is both fruitless and punitive; what they need is compassionate people and community resources to deal with their pain. How many times do we make the mistake of thinking that if we can find the right person or thing to blame we will have done something to solve the problem? How many times do we use judgement as a way to distance those who most need our help? Jesus points us in another direction: Don’t focus on deciding who to blame for the pain in our world. Be slow with the axe and liberal with the

manure—because that is how God is in dealing with each of us when we fall short in our discipleship. The psalmist sums up God’s character as “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” May we, as servants of Christ, be likewise.