



Is It Easier if You Know Who to Blame?

TEXT
John 9:1–12

March 18, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

There was a blind man, and Jesus healed his blindness.

But first, the disciples want to know ... why did this happen?

They ask, “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” It sounds like a strange question. Strange because if it was the man’s sin and he was born blind, then he must have sinned before he was born. Or it must be that God knew he would sin later and punished him ahead of schedule. Does that sound like God to you?

No, surely it was his parents who sinned. Now that makes sense. But blindness as a result of parental sinfulness, that’s harsh. It seems like a relationship with a good therapist would be enough. Inflicting blindness on a baby because the parents have sinned, does that sound like God to you? No, surely not.

We may stumble over the way they ask their question, but desire to know who to blame, well we get that.

That bridge fell in Florida this week. You know, even before the debris is cleared away, there will be those wanting to know who to blame. It can be an important question if we want to make sure another bridge doesn’t collapse.

When things go wrong, we want to know where fault lies. Sometimes that’s important so that we can right a wrong or make tomorrow better than yesterday.

But there is no indication that the disciples are trying to right a wrong. They ask this question because they are anxious. They want to know who to blame — because when they can identify who to blame, then it reaffirms that the world is fair. But particularly when things go wrong, we desire to see the world as orderly, predictable, and assume that everything happens for a reason.

That’s what they were asking: What’s the reason for this man’s blindness? There must be a reason because we want to live in a world that is fair.

I’ve told you before of my childhood neighbor, Danny Martin. He was the one who got me in trouble because we rode our bikes across the bridge into the bank parking lot. He was the one who threw the baseball through the Van Arsdale’s front window and gave me the opportunity to explain it to Mr. Van Arsdale — a man who, even before the baseball ended up in his living room, had not been in a good mood since the 1950s became the 1960s. Danny was the one who,

the night before a third-grade football game, secretly spray painted Tad Densfry’s football helmet the color of the opposing team, so that Tad almost wasn’t allowed to play in the game.

That was Danny Martin. He and I built a tree house that straddled our back yards. It was there in that treehouse, one fall afternoon, that he told me, “My dad doesn’t live with us anymore.” We looked at each other for a long time the way kids do. Adults would have to look away for a moment.

Then he said, “I think it’s my fault.” Of course it wasn’t his fault. Fault is never a simple conversation in these matters. But I remember thinking, “Yeah, it is probably your fault.” I mean I knew him, and there were lots of things that were his fault. But more than that, even as an elementary-aged kid, I was afraid of a world where things like that could happen to kids at random.

That’s what the disciples are asking: *Whose fault is this, Jesus? We need to know who to blame. Tell us this happened for a reason. Because then, if we avoid the reason, it won’t happen to us.*

Jesus said, “No, it’s not him. It’s not his parents. Nobody did anything. He was born blind in order that the work of God might

be revealed in him.” Jesus is not interested in determining who is to blame; Jesus just wants to heal the man. When things go wrong, there is not always a reason, but there is always a response.

Jesus walked right past the need to determine why it’s wrong, and he just does something to try to make it right — as right as it can be.

I want to be clear here. Sometimes there is a reason. We hurt each other. Systems fail. Power is abused. Sometimes there is serious blame, but not always. And never is determining who to blame the purpose. The fingerprints of God are not found in the reason, but in the response.

Dr. Kate Bowler is an assistant professor of Christian History at Duke Divinity School. She is a brilliant scholar. Three years ago, at age 35, she was diagnosed with Stage 4 colon cancer. She has shared that journey with the world with insight and faith. Her field of study is the prosperity gospel. The theology of the prosperity gospel is that God desires to bless you and blessing is connected with your success in life — financial success, prestige, even health.

This is not a gospel that is based on the life of John the Baptist, who was beheaded, or the Apostle Paul, who spent a lot of time in jail before he was martyred. They do talk about Jesus, but not a lot about his sacrificial nature. Most Americans, even in mainline churches, have a dose of prosperity gospel in their theology. It’s that conviction that if I live my life right, then things will

go well for me. If the world is fair, then the way I live my life should produce good results.

But if we lived in such a world, then 35-year-old church history professors wouldn’t get cancer. But they do.

Kate Bowler said that when she got cancer, she wondered what had she done to deserve it. I think most anyone who gets sick wonders the same. At the same time, she said, such questions were fruitless. It’s not her. It’s not her parents. Blame is the wrong conversation.

She said a neighbor was with her and said, “You be strong, and remember, everything happens for a reason.”

Kate’s husband said, “I’d love to hear it.”

“Pardon?”

“I’d love to hear the reason my wife is dying.”

Dr. Bowler said, “My neighbor wasn’t trying to sell him a spiritual guarantee.” [But she wanted to believe there was a reason] why some people die young and others grow old and fussy about their lawns. She wanted some kind of order behind this chaos. There has to be a reason, because without one, we are left as helpless and possibly as unlucky as everyone else.

She wrote: “A friend of mine stops by with heaps and heaps of kale and flies around the kitchen with instructions on how to harness its healing properties. ... Friends keep sending me recipes for green drinks and quinoa salads, and others ship herbal supplements. ... They are saying, ‘You can eat your way out of this.’”¹

When things go wrong, we want control. “Control is a drug, and we are all hooked.”²

We want to believe that life is fair, predictable and, most of all, that I can control tomorrow. But that’s not true. There is chaos in this world.

Some babies are born blind and some people are born poor. Some are born with minds like Stephen Hawking’s, but most would have trouble getting through calculus classes. Some are born in Prairie Village and some are born in what’s left of Aleppo. It’s only in Lake Wobegon that everyone is above average. In the real world, the rain falls on the just and the unjust, and we don’t control it all.

So, in a world too familiar with chaos and suffering, Jesus engages in making things better as much as possible.

He said, “It’s not this man. It’s not his parents. It’s not sin. He was born blind that the works of God might be revealed in him.”

Well, that doesn’t sound great. That sounds like God blinded him at birth so that Jesus could come along someday in his adulthood and open his eyes. That’s hardly good news.

But that’s not actually what it says. The NRSV has added the words “he was born blind.” The Greek doesn’t say that. It just says, neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the work of God might be revealed in him; we must work the work of the one who sent me.

If I understand the text, Jesus is saying that when people are suffering, there is not always a

reason, but there is always a response. Jesus could heal. Sometimes healing comes, sometimes not. But when suffering comes, and it comes to all, there may not be a reason — but there is always a response of grace and compassion and mercy. When suffering comes, the faithful response is love.

“Jesus, was it this man or his parents who sinned?” No. There is no reason. But in love, there is always a response. So be about the work of the one who sends us. In that response, we witness the works of God in our lives.

¹Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason* (2018), pp. 84–85.

²Ibid.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.