

Blaming Others

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Preached at the Lower Merion Baptist Church

Sunday, March 11, 2007; Bryn Mawr, PA

Luke 13:1-9

“...unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

Movement 1 – Why Do We Suffer?

Why do we suffer? On August 29, 2005 Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast causing floodwaters to rise. Approximately 1,836 people died.

Why do we suffer? On December 26, 2004 a tsunami formed in the Indian Ocean killing approximately 300,000 people.

Why do we suffer? On September 11, 2001, terrorists attacked America flying two planes into the World Trade Towers, one plane into the Pentagon, and one into the ground in Pennsylvania due to the action of the passengers. Approximately 3,000 people died that day.

Why do we suffer? Over 500,000 people die in America from cancer each year. More than 910,000 people died of heart disease in America each year.

Why do we suffer?

This is a question that comes across our consciousness in moments of anguish. It is a question that finds its way into the darkness of our despair when we or a loved one is in pain. It is a question that has been echoed by the ancients, by the great minds of our times, by the great thinkers before us, and the smallest child feeling physical, mental or spiritual pain. Why do we suffer?

Thornton Wilder opens his short novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* with the words “On Friday noon, July the twentieth, 1714, the finest bridge in all Peru broke and precipitated five travelers into the gulf below.” He then begins with a wondering, with a questioning, and a musing of why bad things happen to people. Why do we suffer?

Wilder describes a Franciscan monk, Brother Juniper, who witnessed the fateful event of the bridge snapping and the five individuals falling to their death. Wilder describes this monk who saw this horrific event, and in response to the tragedy, decides to show that these five people died because of a divine plan. Brother Juniper was convinced that God had a hand in the collapse of the bridge, and that God had a plan for the five that died, and proceeded to research and find out as much as possible about the five in order to show that there was a purpose and a meaning for the suffering and for the dying of these five individuals.

Isn't this something we look for as well? For meaning, for an explanation, for an assurance that our pain, our suffering, our anguish are all a part of a plan? Don't we want to know that our suffering is not in vain? Don't we want the assurance that our suffering is not merely circumstance? When the people came to Jesus with the event of Pilate and the Galileans, they wanted to know that there was some greater plan, some greater reason for the sacrifice, the murder of the Galileans. They wanted to know that God was involved in one way or another with the massacre of the Galileans. They were asking the question, why is there suffering?

When Job's friends visited him, they assumed that God was, in one way or another, involved in Job's suffering. They assumed that Job must have earned his plight because of something that he must have done. Why is there suffering?

Even in other religions, suffering is something that causes great consternation. Before his enlightenment, the Buddha saw the suffering of poverty, of age, and of sickness and pondered this question of suffering. He came to the conclusion that all life is suffering, stemming from our own desires, and the end point of life is to escape suffering. “What is the noble truth of suffering? Birth is suffering and sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering.” (Words ascribed to the Buddha)

Why do we suffer? The question haunts us, plagues us, and racks our minds and our spirits in the darkest night. We all suffer and shout out into the unending darkness “why!” We all suffer, we witness our loved ones suffering and we demand a reason or a purpose. There must be more than the circumstances, then bad luck. Why do we suffer?

Movement 2 – The “Divine” Answers

Many prefer to answer on God’s behalf. Many like to assume that they can know the mind of God. Many like to assume that they can explain God’s actions or inactions. Those who tell you that God has a plan and your suffering is a part of that plan are trying to explain God. Those who tell you that God is doing this to teach you something are trying to explain the actions of God. It is the human desire that drives one to make an answer where there is no answer to be found. It is that human need for assurance when no true assurance can be offered that drives one towards the explanation. We try to give an answer to the question of suffering and find we have to make an excuse for God in such an answer.

Wilder’s book shows the futility and the hubris in one’s attempt to explain God. Each of the five individuals who happened to be on the bridge when it collapsed recently made a decision to change something in their life, for good or for ill. They were individuals who were crossing into a new life. For example, the Marquesa de Montemayor was a widow who had been smothering her daughter with an unhealthy amount of affection, which drove her daughter away, and drove her to live a life alone and in grief. Yet recently, two days before crossing the bridge, she had a revelation and decided to change her life. She decided to try to mend her relationship with her daughter, to give her daughter the space she needed, to truly love her daughter, to live anew. She decided to live a new life, but never got a chance. Another one of the travelers was a young man, Esteban, who recently lost his twin brother. The two of them were extremely close, and Esteban was paralyzed with grief over the death of his brother. He wouldn’t work, we wouldn’t eat, and he wouldn’t do anything. Yet just that fateful morning, Esteban decided to try to live again, to put his life back together, and to try to find a way to limp with his grief. He didn’t get that opportunity to live. These are just two examples of the five who had died when trying to cross the bridge of San Luis Rey. Brother Juniper tried to explain this event as a part of God’s plan, as God’s will, but why would God take the life of someone who had just decided to change his or her life and live anew? Where is the divine justice in this tragedy? The explanation of the Franciscan is scandalous and offensive.

Yet, in the face of absurdity, we have example after example of theologians, politicians, journalists, and folks on the street striving to offer an answer to the question of suffering. John Calvin claims that we suffer simply because it is a part of God’s plan (What did the Calvinist say after he fell down the stairs... glad that’s over). John Caputo claims that God has no power over illness or natural disasters, and it is by chance that we suffer. Television evangelists like Pat Robertson and James Dobson would argue that we suffer because we have earned our suffering through sin and a less than desirable life in the eyes of God. When the Pharisees saw a blind man they asked Jesus if this man was blind because of his own sins, or because of the sins of his parents. We want to know why. We want to know why Pilate killed those Galileans or why a tower fell and killed eighteen others in Jerusalem. We want to know why so many die in needless ways. We want someone to blame, someone to hold accountable. When I worked with AIDS patients a big challenge was grappling with this question of “why.” Some claimed that they deserved their disease because of their past actions. But if you have ever sat with someone dying of AIDS in the last months of his or her life, you know that no one deserves this sickness. Some claimed that God must have given them their affliction for a reason. Yet I cannot find any reason or justification for such suffering.

Harold Kushner’s classic book *Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People* leaves us with the ambiguity and the unknowing. We cannot truly and fully know why. We suffer. We want an answer. We want a divine answer, and hear only silence in response to our calls and cries for help and intervention. So we answer

for God. We tell God what we are supposed to hear, what the divine words are supposed to say. We answer on behalf of God.

Movement 3 – Jesus’ Deflection/Response

Jesus seems to avoid the question. Jesus seems to sidestep the human longing and desire for an answer and instead turns the question around to focus on the people asking the question. Jesus focuses on the people, the crowd around him, the disciples listening to him, the Pharisees, curiously and cautiously trailing him, all are addressed in Jesus’ answer. The people are asking, “Who is to blame for suffering?” Are we to blame those who suffered because they did not live righteous lives? Are we to blame the Romans because they have advocated sacrifice and have been our oppressors for so long? Are we to blame the architects of the tower when it fell on the eighteen unsuspecting individuals? Who are we to blame when we suffer and when we wrestle with afflictions? Are we to blame God, who is supposed to be in control of everything, who is supposed to have a handle on everything, who is supposed to be our divine protector? Are we to blame ourselves because we have not lived a worthy life? Who are we to blame?

This is the question that is on so many minds of the people approaching and addressing Jesus. It is a question on our mind as well as we wait to hear how Jesus will respond, and what Jesus has to say to our eternal, nagging and driving questions. Yet Jesus does not answer the question. Jesus does not suggest that God is to blame, that Pilate is to blame, or that even the Galileans are to blame for their suffering. Jesus does not say one way or the other if the Jews who were killed by the temple in Jerusalem were to blame. Jesus does not cast blame nor offer explanation for the suffering of many. Instead, Jesus deflects and redirects the question, calling the people to consider their own lives when musing and wondering about the profound questions of suffering. Standing in the shadow of tragedy, Jesus calls the people to consider the good or not so good that they have done, and wonder if their lives are right with God.

Fred Craddock points out that Luke is giving us a powerful tension in the juxtaposition of suffering and judgment. It is a tension of the suffering we all feel and the judgment we all face. The power of this juxtaposition is one that should strive toward balance; one side should not be held over the other. The suffering we face is a real part of our life and our experience. This passage does not belittle suffering and the deep questions that emerge from suffering. Suffering is real and our questions are real.

Yet this passage also calls us to consider our own lives and the idea of judgment. Christ calls us to ask, are we ready for that judgment day? Christ calls us to consider, if we were on that bridge, if we were under that tower, if we were in those buildings, would we be ready to see the Lord? Christ calls us to consider our own lives as we consider the lives of others.

The question of suffering is important, but it is not to center, the end-all of our faith. Brother Juniper was asking why those five were on the bridge when it collapsed. The people are asking why those Galileans who suffered greatly and Jesus is redirecting the question, and calling us to look at ourselves. The question is deflected and redirected.

Movement 4 – A Call to Repent – Did You Bear Fruit?

Jesus is calling us to focus on our life in the here and now, and ask ourselves how we are doing. One of the challenges that I faced with the AIDS community was to move with an individual from a place of asking “why did this happen to me,” to saying, “how should I live my life now that this has happened to me.” The question moved from one of self-pity to one of action. In a sense, Jesus is asking the people, knowing that suffering can happen, and that tragedy can happen, how are you going to live your life differently? He seems to go one step farther and suggest that if you are not living in a way that is right with God, then you may suffer as well. This is not an easy message to preach or to hear. We would rather just rest on the grace of God. We would rather just assume that we are set for salvation, and I think in the end, if you have Jesus in your heart, you are

ready to be with your Lord. Yet at the same time we cannot give into the tempting luxury of ignoring the call and the challenge of this passage and to rest completely on grace. In this passage we hear the harsh word that we will be judged if we do not repent. It would almost be easier to focus on the suffering of the world, then to consider this harsh call of judgment.

What is it that Christ is calling us to consider, to hold, to weigh and to rest with? What is it that Christ is calling us to repent if we need to repent? Consider the parable that Christ smoothly weaves into he calls for judgment. Consider the focus of the parable, a tree that for three years does not bear fruit. A tree that for three years does not show any sign or hope of progress, and is seen as wasting soil, wasting space and wasting nutrients. Christ is asking if you are bearing fruit.

Think about this parable. For three years, Christ has been teaching, showing miracles, showing signs of grace, and calling the people to embrace and experience the fullness of the Kingdom of God. For three years Christ has been culling and nurturing the disciples, the followers in hope that they might begin to practice and live what they have been hearing. And now Christ asks, in his indirect way, just after speaking of judgment, if you are bearing fruit, or if you are wasting soil, space and nutrients.

It would be like hiring a new working, putting time and training in that worker, and then noticing that week after week the worker does nothing and shows no initiative or progress. That worker is bearing little or no fruit.

It would be like investing in a fund that promises to grow, but does little to nothing in actual growth. Putting your money in a fund that does not grow would be akin to burying your money in the ground or putting it in a mattress. The money would bear no fruit.

Now Jesus is calling us to consider ourselves. Jesus is calling us to consider our own lives. We have been hearing the word; we have been experiencing the grace of the Word of Christ. We have been walking with Jesus, have we been bearing any fruit? Have we been people that have initially said “yes” to Jesus with our words in that initial commitment, and then went and said “no” with our actions and our lives? Have we been bearing fruit? This passage is not calling us to be perfect, but it is calling us to be honest and contrite and, if necessary, to repent.

Like I said, this is not a comfortable message to consider. This is not a safe idea to hear and let rest on our heart. It might be easier to sit with suffering, because then we can cast the focus and maybe even the blame on others, if not God. We could sit, as Job did, and wax eloquently on how we don’t deserve our lot. Yet Christ brings the message of judgment and repentance to us. What are we doing now? How are we living our lives now as Christians? This is not a philosophical question. This is not a question that is considering our place heaven or the great beyond. This is a here and now question. Paul Tillich is a theologian who called us to spend more time focusing on the here and now of the Christian life instead of where one is going. Tillich claims that Christ frees us to live in the here and now, and bear fruit in the here and now. Tillich is an existentialist theologian that calls people to consider if they are indeed bearing fruit in their lives.

Ask yourself, if you are bearing fruit, if you are walking with Jesus. Focus on your life here and now. Be honest, be contrite, and be open. Are you bearing fruit?

Movement 5 – The Divine Patience

Examine your life with a sense of hope and not despair. The Day of Judgment is not today. The day when we need to be honest before the Lord is not today. We are given more time, we are given today. Today is the day when we can repent, and go forth with our Lord. This is how the parable ends, with a plea for divine patience, and it is granted. The gardener asks for more time, and more time is granted. We are given time with each day we have. We are given time with each moment in our lives. We have hope in each day that we can begin again.

It is not a new thing to request leniency from the Lord. It is not a new thing to ask God for patience and for grace. Abraham bargained with the Lord for the sake of the righteous in Sodom and Gomorrah, Moses bargained with the Lord for the sake of the Israelites. Jesus gives us grace and time as well. It is like getting an extension on your taxes, or like getting one more chance from you parents, we are given more time to repent and to commit to live in a way that bears more fruit. We are given today. See this as a sign of hope. See this as a sign of grace as you examine your own life. We are given a second chance every day to live a life that we are called to live by Christ. Just as God's judgment is real, so is God's grace real. We are given more time. We are given today.

Movement 6 – Bearing Good Fruit

So let us live today and into tomorrow with a new focus and a new conviction. Let us live today and into tomorrow with the promise to bear good fruit, with the promise to be the people Christ has called us to be. Let us start today with contrition, with an apology to God. Let us simply say to God, "I'm sorry," and then walk from there. Let us live into tomorrow as that tree that blooms and blossoms as we walk with Jesus. Start today with your repentance and go into tomorrow with your conviction to be someone new. Let us bear good fruit.

We bear fruit by sharing the love and life we find in Christ with others. We bear good fruit by demanding that God's children be given the love they deserve. We bear good fruit by being the soil and the nutrients here in the church that others will need to be disciples of Christ. Let us go and bear good fruit. The reality is that bad things will happen, we will suffer, and we will face tragedy even as we face hope. The question is not who to blame, but who are you as you enter into those times of tragedy? Are you someone who wishes you have lived differently, or are you someone who is content with the way you have lived? Have you been bearing good fruit?

AMEN