

Does God Grade on a Curve?

Luke 13:1-9

March 7, 2010

His name was Gary. He was my brother. He was diagnosed as a paranoid/schizophrenic while he was in the Coast Guard. There were certainly signs earlier but the refusing to obey a superior because the Bible told him he didn't have to, well, luckily his superior recognized it as an out-of-character response and had him hospitalized instead of put in the brink.

What followed were years of stays in VA hospitals, counseling and different drugs and painful conversations in the family. Oh, he married and had two beautiful girls, but it ended in divorce. There were days it was pure hell. He committed suicide in 1985 at the age of 32.

The question most often asked was "Why?" Why did God make him mentally ill? Sure he did a lot of things wrong – sure he sinned – but were the things he did really bad enough to cause God to do this to him? What he did wasn't as bad as And the prayers offered for him to be healed – to get better – to just be happy once in awhile were voiced by many.

Some of the most intense moments happened while I was attending United Seminary in Dayton and Dorothy was teaching school in West Carrollton. So, we had a supportive faith community who helped us – supported us – listened to our questions – questioned with us. Together we contemplated about and struggled with God's role in it all. With the help of the seminary community our understanding of God and what God does began to change. The questions began to fade.

Near the end of our seminary days we went through two miscarriages. People in the local church were helpful. Several persons who had been through it came alongside us and shared their stories. The first few times we heard "It's nature's way of saying things aren't right" the words were comforting. But, after awhile clichés and conversations from others got old and the why questions surfaced. After all, what had we done so wrong that we deserved this in our lives? What was God punishing us for? How come God wasn't allowing us to have children when so many were having them who were doing really lousy jobs of raising them or didn't even want them?

Now, we knew in our heads that wasn't good theology – that wasn't how we believed God functioned – that God was the source of comfort for us and not the one who would do such things to us, but ... despite our knowing what we should believe, the old questions were hard to resist.

A few years later I was the associate pastor of a local church. The husband and dad of one of our families was hospitalized, diagnosed with stomach cancer and died five days after the diagnosis. I worked closely with the wife in the education life of the church. They had two children, four and two. The congregation was in shock.

We were involved with an adult Sunday School class made up of many singles and couples with children about the same age. Many of us had not grown up in the community and thus the group was our local family. We relied on one another. Members of that Sunday School class echoed the questions being voiced by members of the family and community: "Why?" "What did Tom do to deserve this?" "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

Someone shared in class one day that they heard about a book a rabbi by the name of Harold Kushner had written. We decided to read it together. Kushner wrote it in reaction to his own loss of his fourteen-year-old son, Aaron, who died of a rare disease which causes premature aging. Kushner said he wrote the book for people “who have been hurt by life.”

The title of the book itself is revealing I think – When Bad Things Happen to Good People. From the outset his intent was not to answer the question of why, but rather to offer a solution to a reality. Bad things happen to all of us – the good and the bad. Trying to resolve the why question too often is a dead end street. Instead, Kushner proposed what we need to do is grieve with an eye toward what we’re going to do constructively as a result of the bad that happens to us.

The people who addressed Jesus in the scene described in today’s scripture lesson were products of their day. The question they put to Jesus was based on a common held belief – that bad things happen for reasons – that there is no such thing as accidents. Not much is really known about the episode they mentioned to Jesus. Some Bible scholars speculate that there was a day when the Galileans gathered to protest a decision on the part of Pontius Pilate to build a new and improved water system. His plan was to use temple monies to pay for the project; and that didn’t set too well with the Galileans. So, they held a protest rally. Pilate had his soldiers go incognito to the rally. This theory claims that there came a time when a signal was given to break up the crowd and Pilate’s soldiers got a little carried away and killed some of the rioters. Pilate decided to use the episode to discourage any further outbreaks. What he did was he ordered that the blood of the slain Galileans be mixed with the blood of the sacrifices - a sort of “Don’t mess with me” message.

Jesus knew the question on the minds of the persons in the crowd and so he gave voice to it: “Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered the way they did?” He didn’t even wait for them to respond. He immediately stated his position: “I tell you no.”

And then he went on and reminded those who had brought up the blood-mixing episode of another somewhat obscure tragedy – this one though with a much less clear reason for questioning whether the people affected were guilty of something that would cause them to be at fault for their death. A water tower had collapsed in Siloam and eighteen were killed. Some Bible scholars suggest that the reason Jesus brought this second episode up was because the two events were connected. The theory being that the eighteen had actually agreed to work on Pilate’s hated water system and were paid with the disputed temple monies thus opening up the door in the minds of some that the eighteen who died were being punished by God for cooperating with the Roman government – again, that their suffering was the result of their sinning. And again Jesus phrased the question their rumors implied, “Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?” And again he didn’t hesitate to answer his own question: “I tell you no.”

So, why do we continue to believe the way we do – that bad things happen for a reason? Kushner wrote in one place in his book: “It is tempting at one level to believe that bad things happen to people (especially other people) because God is a righteous judge who gives them what they deserve. By believing that, we keep the world orderly and understandable. We give people the best possible reason for being good and for avoiding sin. And by believing that, we can maintain an image of God as all-loving, all-powerful and totally in control. Given the reality of human nature, given the fact that none of us is perfect and that each of us can, without too much difficulty, think of things (we’ve) done which (we) should not have done, we can always find grounds for justifying what happens to us.”¹

Let me stay with Kushner for a few more minutes. A major portion of his book is a description of the ways we try to explain misfortune – the bad that happens around and to us. And we’ve only time this morning to list the seven he identifies:

- 1) Someone made a mistake, or failed in the observance of some religious duty.
- 2) God has a hidden purpose, or is making use of knowledge we don’t have.
- 3) Suffering itself will turn out to be good for us.
- 4) God’s purpose is in the grand design of the Universe (which is good and beautiful), not in the life of the individual.
- 5) Suffering teaches something, either to us or to those who see us suffer.
- 6) Suffering is a test.
- 7) Death leads us and our loved ones to a better place.²

Kushner rejects all of these explanations noting: “All the responses to tragedy have at least one thing in common. They all assume that God is the cause of our suffering, and they try to understand why God would want us to suffer.”³ The majority of the rest of his book is dedicated to arguing for another approach besides God being the cause of our suffering. He proposes four reasons for suffering instead of the ones that suggest suffering is the will of God. These are:

- 1) Random, circumstantial suffering, being in the wrong place at the wrong time.
- 2) Suffering is caused by the workings of natural law.
- 3) Suffering is caused by the actions of evil people.
- 4) Suffering we cause ourselves by the way we handle our initial suffering.⁴

Now, Jesus left no doubt that he didn’t agree with the widely held view of his day, and sadly ours far too often as well, that suffering is the result of the sufferer or someone close to the sufferer doing something wrong – committing some sin. While to be sure some of our suffering may be the result of someone doing something wrong, it’s never punishment from God for that mistake or sin. It’s simply a false and cruel interpretation and unjustly points the finger at others and God. Saying to a suffering person, “God must have a reason,” is as blasphemous as insurance companies labeling natural disasters as “acts of God.”

Now, while I hope with all my heart you hear Jesus’ profound response and challenge to those who offer clichés for suffering that make God the source of pain rather than comfort – that create between God and those who suffer these canyons of separation rather than these paths on which we can walk with one who hurts with us. You know the well-intended comments: “God needed another flower in the heavenly garden.” “God believed you could take it more than others.” “God is going to use this loss of life to cause others to be more careful.” While I hope you hear Jesus’ response and take it to heart, Jesus said some other things in today’s text.

After each proclamation that he didn’t hold the view that suffering was the result of sinning, he added: “But, unless you repent, you too will perish.” What he basically was saying was, “While it is true that there’s no direct correlation between the bad things that happen to people and their sin, it’s also not true that because things are going well in our lives, that we’re guiltless.” “Surviving tragedy is not proof that we are without sin.” “Even if life is running pretty smoothly, it’s not an indication that we don’t need to fess up, repent, and start bearing fruit.”

You see, Jesus was not about to let those standing around him that day misinterpret his answer as somehow a statement of their righteousness, their guiltlessness. Jesus’ point was that those who died were no greater sinners than anyone in the crowd, nor were those in the crowd any less sinners. His point was not to rehabilitate

the reputations of those who died but to challenge the survivors to not think of themselves as better than those who had tragedy come their way.⁵ And the way to do that, he said, is to repent – to start looking at things from God’s perspective rather than from our own.

Repentance is more than simply admitting that we’ve done some things wrong – more than simply seeking God’s forgiveness – more than simply feeling sorry for the things that we’ve done. It’s a changing our minds about ourselves, about the world, about what’s important. It’s an accepting that our independence comes only from our being dependent upon God.

To further illustrate his point Jesus then told a story about a man who owned a vineyard with a fig tree in the middle of it that wasn’t producing. After the fig tree didn’t produce any fruit for three years the owner ordered his vinedresser to cut it down because it didn’t deserve to use up the precious soil his grapevines needed. The vinedresser asked the vineyard owner to give the fig tree another chance – a second chance – one more year. He proposed to put a little more effort into the care of the fig tree.

Now, there’s no question that one of the messages this passage might be interpreted to be conveying is that there does come a time when our chances run out – when change, repentance, is no longer possible. The connection between this fig tree parable and the words Jesus shared with the crowd just before he told this story, is that those who are enjoying a relatively easy ride through life had better wake-up – had better pay attention – because there does come a time when the chances end and we are held accountable for our lives – that there will be a day when we will have to give an accounting for the fruit we’ve born or not born.

And yet, despite the lack of a description of the vineyard owner’s response, the parable suggests to us that God is reluctant to give up on us; that God always holds out hope that we will come alive and bear the fruit we’ve been created to bear. God is a patient God – a forgiving God – a merciful God.

It is Jesus who seeks from God “one more year” to get our acts together – “one more year” to grow, live and prosper. God doesn’t mindlessly punish – God isn’t interested in lining us all up and arbitrarily picking some of us out as worthy of forgiveness. God doesn’t grade on a curve. God is a fair judge – holds us accountable for our lives and actions.

Lent is a time for us to spend some intentional time reflecting on our lives and considering what it might be appropriate to prune from it and how we might fertilize it so that fruit might be born from our faithfully living our intended lives. Lent is a time for us to consider what needs to be corrected and asking ourselves how we might better feed our spirits and nurture our souls so that we can better serve God.⁶

Let us pray.

1. Harold S. Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), p. 9 – 10.
2. Ibid., pp. 6 – 30.
3. Ibid., p. 29.
4. Ibid., pp. 46 – 112.
5. Emphasis, p. 20.
6. Susan J. Foster, “Judgment and Grace,” The Clergy Journal, November/December, 2009, p. 28.

