

“Moving Beyond Questions of Why”

John 9:1-41

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Human beings have a tendency to look for someone to blame for the struggles we face whether these struggles are personal, national or global. We may feel personally responsible and thus bathe ourselves in guilt and shame or point the finger elsewhere denying all responsibility. We may think pragmatically or run to the most hare-brained idea. But we usually look for someone or something to blame.

When HIV was first identified, there were all sorts of judgmental explanations given especially because of who seemed most likely to have the disease. The victims were blamed for their sickness, at least by some. When hurricanes have hit various parts of our nation and missed others, certain religious figures have claimed God’s protection for some and God’s judgment on others. When the massive tsunami in the Indian Ocean took nearly a quarter of a million lives in December 2004, many wondered why such a horrific event occurred - why scientifically and theologically. We want to know why bad things happen.

So, it is inevitable that as we face the realities of COVID-19 - both the straightforward medical challenges and the secondary consequences of social upheaval, emotional distress and economic woe – we will ask the question “Why?” and look for someone or something to blame. And there is a certain value in the scientific forms of the question.

Understandings of disease and treatment, in addition to models of societal response, are absolutely critical not just for our response to this pandemic but for our ability to prevent and respond to future challenges. We need to understand medical realities and we need to take responsibility for human mistakes in order to learn from them.

But it is possible to get stuck in the mode of wondering why, whether the struggle is personal, national or global. And this is not particularly helpful. There is a time to move beyond the questions of why in order to figure out how we might respond to certain realities.

The story we have read today from John 9 sheds light on this subject. As the story begins, Jesus sees a man who was born blind and his disciples immediately ask the why question, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” The question reflects the thinking of the time that the blessings of health and success result from faithful living while the realities of hardship and disease are the direct result of sin. We would claim not to believe in such a superstitious view of life and judgmental view of God, but our emotions betray a remnant of this thinking. We often wonder what we have done wrong to suffer hardship, what a loved one has done to deserve a certain diagnosis.

So, we understand this quick move to ask why the man is blind, but the form of the question seems absurd. How could the parents cause the blindness and how could the man born blind be responsible? Well, scripture does say that God is a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation (Deuteronomy 5:9). Setting aside the God part of this, we might think of how patterns of abuse and addiction are handed down before we dismiss the notion. And some rabbis taught that a child could sin in the womb. I have known some pregnant mothers who might agree...

But no matter how we understand the backdrop of this question, Jesus doesn't get stuck on it. In fact, he doesn't even answer it. “Neither this man nor his parents sinned;” he says, “he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.” This is a prognosis, not a diagnosis. Jesus is not saying God blinded the man so that God could heal him and come off looking good. What kind of God would do that? He is saying that no matter why the man is blind, the point is he is blind and thus in need of healing, and God will provide healing through him.

Jesus does not get stuck on the question why, though he does say that neither the man nor his parents are responsible. Jesus does not blame the victims. He rejects the simplistic and judgmental thinking of his day about suffering, here and on other occasions, and this is no small matter. It is an approach for us to embrace. The Christlike approach to suffering is not to judge the victims.

But even more importantly, Jesus not only refrains from judgment, he moves quickly to response. The question is not, “Who caused this

blindness?” but “What are we going to do about it?” And we know what Jesus does, he heals the man, which suggests another thing for us. The Christlike approach to suffering is to respond with compassion.

So, our response to HIV has been to participate in ministries that care for AIDS patients - offer medical assistance, social and economic support, as well as spiritual comfort. The treatments for the disease have improved and thus the realities have evolved, but the basic calling to compassion remains the same.

Our response to hurricanes and other natural disasters has been to send teams that help with all sorts of practical needs from emergency food and shelter to cutting up downed trees and tearing out destroyed materials all the way to rebuilding homes and communities. There is a place for assessing the underlying causes of the increase in the number and severity of natural disasters, making sense of the realities of climate change, and doing what we can to make a difference, but while that gets sorted out (and pray God it does!), there are immediate needs to address. When we send disaster response teams, when we extend compassion, we are following the Christ who heals the man born blind.

Our response to the massive tsunami of 2004 was to support CBF personnel, including the Rubles, who were in Indonesia at the time, as they provided safe water, food, shelter and many other things to hundreds of thousands of displaced and grieving people.

Our response to COVID-19 is much the same. There are scientific questions to ask in regard to how such viruses function and how we battle them. These are significant concerns we need to support in every way, including financially. It is self-serving for me to say, since Dana and I have two adult children in medical research, but we all depend on research. These why questions matter as do questions about how to mobilize local, national and global resources.

Theological questions of why, however, are best set aside. How and when an All-Powerful and All-Loving God interacts with this world and how God relates to suffering are worthy concerns. But no one has an easy answer to these questions. We must pursue them with humility. And we should be wary of theological explanations that place the blame on someone else for their suffering or ours.

I think of a story about English minister Leslie Weatherhead. During World War II, his church in London was hit by a bomb and part of the sanctuary, including the pulpit, was destroyed. A more conservative colleague said it was no surprise God had allowed a bomb to fall on Weatherhead's pulpit, given all the liberal heresy that came from it. Shortly thereafter a bomb fell on the conservative minister's church destroying it completely, whereupon Weatherhead remarked, "There emanated from that pulpit a profound silence."

It is unwise for many reasons to view others as worthy of God's judgment! It is best to set aside the theological questions of why.

So, there is medical science to pursue, as well as public policy to debate. There are theological questions to ponder briefly, then set aside. Most of all, there is compassion to extend. Jesus moves beyond questions of why and so should we. So *are we* as we worship in an odd way, keeping a distance from one another, as we check in with each other, pray for each other and offer practical assistance to all in need.

There was a fascinating story this week about a distillery in rural Pennsylvania that decided to act in a compassionate way. They heard about the demand for hand sanitizer outpacing current supply and realized that hand sanitizer is not that difficult to make. The hardest part is getting the alcohol and they know how to do that. So, they quit making bourbon and started making hand sanitizer. A woman in town happened to have a large number of small bottles leftover from a company she used to own. And together they have provided thousands of bottles of hand sanitizer and they are charging nothing for them.

The story provides a nice counterpoint to the stories of people hoarding critical goods for financial gain. And it provides an example for how we might respond to situations of great need. We do something practical to help. We extend kindness in some way. The Christlike approach to suffering is to respond with compassion.

And yet, before we leave this story, there is one other bit of light it might shed on current realities. We might think that when Jesus heals the man born blind, everyone celebrates this miracle. We would be wrong. They do not. The man is elated, his friends and family are

happily astonished, but the Pharisees blow a gasket in disgust, ostensibly because Jesus has healed on the Sabbath. But they would not be thrilled no matter when the miracle happened to take place because Jesus is not an authorized leader. He doesn't have the necessary credentials.

So, they call the man in for questioning. They want to know how the healing happened? They ask him this repeatedly, they call in his parents and ask them, they call him back in again. They proceed like a grand jury seeking an indictment. They do not want to honor Jesus. They want to find him guilty of something, though at one point, in a moment of Shakespearean comic relief, John says the man asks the Pharisees, "Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" They are not amused.

In the end, the man meets Jesus again and receives another gift, the gift of faith. Jesus heals him with no strings attached, this comes later, but it is wonderful. But while everything ends well for the man, the Pharisees are still upset. Nothing Jesus can say will change this reality.

The message for us is that sometimes even when we do the right thing and respond to human needs with Christlike compassion, we get some grief. Advocates of racial justice in the 1960's encountered hostile resistance, especially from fellow Christians. Early pioneers of AIDS ministry met would-be-righteous criticism constantly. Many who assist immigrants and refugees today are ridiculed and some are subject to arrest. And when we do the right thing in response to COVID-19, there are some who mock this response, buying into bizarre conspiracy theories or simply discounting the seriousness of the threat.

But if we are waiting to take action until everyone agrees, we will never act. Jesus' experience tells us that when we extend compassion in his name, someone will object. We have to do what we trust in our hearts is right and make peace with the consequences. We pray that in time everyone will understand. We pray that our efforts to slow the spread of this virus will reduce its impact. We pray for healing and a return to normalcy. But until these prayers are answered, we follow Jesus in moving beyond the questions of why to acts of compassion – simple things like social distancing and checking in with each other – and as we do, we place our lives now, as always, in God's care.