

Blame Game

Lent 3C

Luke 13:1-9

Slide: PLTS (1)

One of our wonderful St. John's youth recently asked me what kind of classes I had to take at "God School". She meant what classes pastors take in seminary, but she couldn't remember that it's called seminary, so she called it "God School". I like it. I like the replacement. It is, after all, a school where God is the subject. Seminary is a weird word anyway and who really knows what it means.

But, before some of you go and Google it, the word "Seminary" comes from the Latin word "Seminarius" which is a garden plot, a plot of soil for seedlings. And, in garden plots, you grow things. So, a seminary is a place where pastors and deacons are grown - God school.

Slide: UCSF (2)

One of the ways pastors are grown, is by placing them in a hospital chaplaincy for three months so that later, when pastors visit their parishioners in the hospital, they have a better sense of caring for those who are ill or in spiritual crisis while being ill. I did my hospital chaplaincy at the University of San Francisco Mount Zion Cancer Center. Every third weekend, I would be on-call for the whole weekend, and that would mean I would sleep at the hospital with a pager nearby and if a call happened even in the middle of the night, I went.

The calls that I hated to get were not the ones you might think. They weren't the calls from the morgue, or the psychiatric ward, or even the emergency room. The calls I hated to get were the ones on the pediatric floor, the floor where babies would lay in cribs deathly ill, premature, or the small little ones walking down the hall with IV drips in their arms.

I remember one evening very clearly, even though it's

been fifteen years and I don't recall the names of those involved. I had received a call to visit a mother of a very sick child. This child was playing with a friend when her head began to hurt. By the time this little girl found her mother, she was almost completely blind. A CAT scan revealed a large mass behind her optic nerve and surgery was absolutely required as soon as possible.

On the day of the surgery, I was still on-call and I went to see the mother of this girl. I found her sitting outside of the lobby beside a table, sitting on top of it was an ashtray full of cigarette butts. My nose told me that she had probably smoked every one of those cigarettes, but she wasn't smoking at that time. I sat at the table with her and after some small talk she said, and I remember this very clearly.

"This is my punishment for smoking these cigarettes. God couldn't get me to stop smoking any other way, so he made my baby sick. And, I really want to stop smoking

but I can't. I'm going to kill my own child."

Slide: Is God punishing... (3)

So, here I was in "God School", the place where pastors are trained to learn to be where people are at the time of crisis. You learn that you accept the feelings of the other person even when you know what they are saying may be misguided, untrue, or even wrong according to Scripture. To be perfectly honest, I also didn't know what to say to her, but what I wanted to say was that God didn't do anything of the kind and that it wasn't her fault.

Yet, a correcting of her theology wasn't going to do anything for her at the time. She truly believed she was to blame. Why? Well, she was probably taught never to question God, to wonder where God was in this suffering, or the worst, blame God for anything. Therefore, that leaves two people to blame: her daughter or herself...which of those people could be blamed...or

could that blame be placed somewhere else?

Slide: God is Love (4)

Personally, as a person who has been through suffering in my life, I wanted to describe to her a loving God, a God who did not punish her by giving her child a tumor, a God who enters the pain with us, a God who instead took on all the blame on the cross, but that would have only appeased my own feelings on the subject. She would not be moved. At that time, she needed to blame herself.

Slide: pointing finger (5)

The blame game...it's not new, most certainly. It's as old as creation. In the story of Eden, Adam and Eve eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. When asked by God why they did that, Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the serpent, but neither took responsibility. So, the blame game is as old as the universe.

But, perhaps you have noticed that it's been ramping

up very significantly in our country's discourse these days. The disgust we all feel at the blatant blaming, the vitriol, and the insufferable lack of listening to the other side in this what has become a very partisan frenzy is simply ridiculous. At least, I feel disgust right now. Maybe you do, too.

The blaming of other people because, well, you can't blame yourself in politics, nor take any responsibility for anything, it's worse than I can remember in my adult life. So, today's Gospel reading is quite apropos for the discourse in our world right now, not only here, but BREXIT, what a mess! Blame, blame, blame, perhaps some of it earned, and yet reflected away from where the blame may lie. But, not to worry, our own personal lives qualify as well.

It's interesting to me that in today's Gospel reading from Luke, Jesus doesn't give us the answer we would hope to hear. We want to know who to blame. But, he doesn't seem to care about the blame

game when some people come to him and say essentially: “Hey, Jesus, those people who were killed by Pilate must have been bad to get that end and what about those who had a tower fall on them? Wow, whose sin caused that to happen?” The implication here in this story is that those who died must have deserved it, that somehow, they were to blame for becoming victims.

Jesus’ response turns it back to them: “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” Instead of recalling the sins of those who died, he turns it back on those who think they are lucky - in fact, maybe they think they are more righteous.

Slide: Han Solo (6)

Now, just as a side, the desire to blame is human. It’s the easiest way to explain away a very hard problem to tackle, that of human suffering. It’s also hard to do the right thing and confess you are to blame in something when you are. Lastly, it’s

often difficult to know, when in human suffering, just who is at fault for something because sometimes the answer is no one.

Slide: Blame (7)

And yet, it’s very tempting to have someone to blame. I can’t tell you how many times I have heard people blame earthquakes on the supposed sin of certain people, when in reality an earthquake is a random natural phenomenon caused by two tectonic plates rubbing together. And yet, over and over again, I hear Christians blame people, even the victims of natural disasters.

How awesome it is then that Jesus has something to say about this. It’s clear that he doesn’t want us to do that. Even though it might be convenient for us and easier, blaming an earthquake on the people who suffer isn’t solving the problem of why bad things happen to good people.

Unfortunately, Jesus doesn't give us an answer as to why they happen either. Jesus chooses not to go there. "No," he tells them, "but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." He turns it back on those who ask the question. So, on one hand, Jesus says that sin did not cause them to die - yeah! But, on the other hand, focus on your own need for repentance- oh.

In other words, Jesus is teaching us to avoid the blame game, instead asking those who would even posit such a question to look at their own selves. He tells them to repent. Now, the word repent is not a scary word. The word, repent, means to turn around in this case, to turn back around to God. Jesus is asking us to turn away from this kind of blaming, this kind of thinking, and instead asks us to focus on what God is doing within the situation. God is not toppling towers upon people for their sins. Instead, God is patiently waiting for renewal of relationship.

Slide: Fig Tree (8)

Which leads us to the second story in today's Gospel reading about a gardener who asks the landowner to give him one more year to grow figs on a tree that is bare. So, the gardener prepares the tree as many gardeners do: he puts manure on it to help it grow.

While this is a very short story, Jesus gives us an image of God who doesn't punish, but is instead slow to punish, waiting to see if instead the tree (meaning us) will bear fruit. It is a story of grace that we are to remember when we look for someone...even ourselves...to blame, that instead, God hopes that we will root ourselves in the soil God tends and return to the growth we so very much need.

I'm not saying that human sin doesn't have consequences, because it does, but this story about the blame game tells us that Jesus would rather we repent, turn back and hear the word that God would have for us in a

difficult situation or suffering. For, when we turn back to God, we find that even though we don't have the answers we want, we still have a gardener, Jesus Christ, who is tending to us, full of patience and grace.

Slide: Return to the Lord (9)

It is a common practice that during Lent, we often hear the words "Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." Therefore, the next time we look to blame someone or something for why suffering has happened, instead take a moment to gaze upon the cross; for it is the cross whereupon hung all the blame of the world.

Amen.