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Sermon for April 3, 2011
Stanford Memorial Church

Here's Mud in Your Eye

‘Rabbi,’ the apostles asked, ‘who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ We hear this question in John’s gospel today, written after Jesus’ death, around the year 90, and we hear similar questions and related logic even today.

In the 80s, at the start of the AIDS epidemic, some in this country declared this disease to be a punishment for sin. Just two weeks ago Tokyo Gov. Shintaro Ishihara called Japan’s disasters a "divine punishment" for Japanese egoism. Each of us here has probably had a time in our lives when we have found ourselves suffering (physically, spiritually, or materially) and have asked, why me? What did I do to deserve this? What did I do wrong?

A New York Times essay from April of 2010 describes blame of illness this way:

“All of us, no matter how learned, carry an eternally primitive creature in our brains . . . who will always react to illness — any illness — with anger, disbelief and a search for blame . . . We blame that coughing woman in the subway for our cold, the giant meat company for our [food poisoning](#), all manner of chemicals and electromagnetic radiation for our cancers, and fast-food outlets for our [diabetes](#) and heart disease. We cannot experience illness without casting around for blame.”¹

This New York Times editorial speaks a truth we know. And it raises the question for me, as a seminarian, “Where in Christian theology and

¹ Abigail Zuger, M.D. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/20/health/20essa.html>

history does this tendency to blame come from? It is clearly as old as the stories in the Bible. Sin and punishment are indisputable reference points in Christian Theology. And Christian Theology permeates our cultural experience whether we recognize it or not.

And yet, as we find in John's gospel account, Jesus isn't interested in blame. Jesus is interested in healing. *'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?'* Jesus answered, *'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.'*

What could this mean for us? How can we turn away from the tendency to blame and toward Jesus' message of healing? The Pharisees in Jesus' time were focused on the blame and sin, and like us, the disciples were quick to render this reaction too. Furthermore, when things do not go our way, if we do not blame ourselves, we may be inclined to blame God. Or we may give up on the idea all together that God is a source of hope for us. Somehow, Jesus' message of healing can get lost.

This was the case with a friend of mine who died recently. Hers is a story about a fully engaged life and heartily fought death that seemed influenced by pervasive and powerful messages about blame that are deeply entrenched in our cultural and religious thinking.

For several years, my friend Martina fought a battle against cancer. She finally succumbed to the disease on November 28th. Martina was a highly admired medical doctor, a committed spouse, and the mother of four young children. She fought this disease with every bit of intellect, physical and emotional strength she could muster. And let me tell you, Martina could muster a lot. This is a woman who while suffering from the ravages of cancer, the side affects of chemotherapy, and pregnant, still came to the pool

several times a week and outswam most of us there. Martina did not, however, turn to religion for support. In fact, she seemed to reject it wholesale.

More than once during her long and very painful battle with cancer Martina challenged me saying, “Mary, you are praying for me, right? Shouldn’t that praying be doing something for me? What good is it doing me?”

Although she was surrounded by loving family and friends at her death, it seemed that Martina’s understanding of God brought her no solace. At her death, many are left grieving her, and I wonder what influences might have put her at such a distance from God. I wonder how these messages impact the rest of us -- the living and the grieving.

Understandably, when people become gravely ill, or suffer a significant loss they ask “why me?” Or “why him?” We see this in the Gospel passage today and throughout Christian history. Unfortunately, a predominant tenet upheld from early Christian history offers little comfort. It ultimately blames the victim of tragedy for her or his own condition. Through this lens, people see illness or tragedy as God’s punishment for sinfulness. “From Paul through Augustine and on to the Protestant Reformers, the primary focus on sin and evil has been on the sinner.”² The underlying principle to this argument is the so-called Adamic Myth. “According to the Adamic Myth, evil is not imposed but breaks into the world through a free choice against God’s will, a sin that dashes the created innocence of humanity with the palpable guilt of human suffering that sin

² Margaret D. Kamitsuka et al, “Sin and Evil” in Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, eds. *Constructive Theology*, (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2005), 119.

causes.”³ Adam and Eve ate the apple, so humans get what they deserve, this argument suggests. When we sin, we are punished.

The reach of this doctrine of just desserts is clear in Literature and popular culture as well. We can see it in everything from award winning novels to edgy television shows. For instance, in the novel White Teeth⁴ by Zadie Smith, two characters crash in a motorcycle accident but only the girlfriend is injured. The uninjured boyfriend interprets his good luck in light of his girlfriend’s injury through a doctrine that says, “good things happen to good people.” She was bad, so she was hurt. I must be sinless.

The TV show *The Colbert Report* satirizes this narrow outlook on being good, saying, “You do God’s work for years and years and then you go to Heaven where you get to play Wii Bowling with Ben Franklin.”⁵ In this comedy piece, Colbert boils the debate down simply to those saved and going to heaven and the rest, sinners.

These examples reflect simplistic models of false dichotomy between those sinners who can only be blamed for the condition in which they find themselves and those who are blame free. We find these ideas cemented in Western modern culture around sin and punishment. Presented so starkly and so absurdly, it is easy to understand why this sort of faith would be rejected by someone like my friend Martina or make her angry at a construction of a God of such caprice and pettiness.

In his article, *Where is God*, Jon Sobrino writes of earthquake survivors who asked, “What kind of God do we have? A mean God who

³ Margaret D. Kamitsuka et al, “Sin and Evil” in Serene Jones and . . . 122.

⁴ Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*. (Vintage Books: New York, 2000), 17.

⁵ *The Colbert Report* [Video]. (2010). Retrieved Nov. 8, 2010, from www.colbertnation.com/.../213737/december-11-2008/the-word---the-unbearable-lightness-of-supreme-being.

does not help people in their misfortunes, or a powerless God who can not do so?”⁶ These are age-old questions and they often emerge in times of crisis. The catch in this kind of thinking is that if God is good and omnipotent, then God’s goodness and omnipotence is called into question when God does not deliver as expected or desired. The result may be fear of having made God angry or the reaction, as in Martina’s and others’ cases, may be rejection of such a God.

During Martina’s last week alive, a small group of family and friends took shifts through day and night at her bedside, holding her hand, providing her wish that she not die alone in the hospital. Martina knew connection; she knew love; and yet something in her exposure to religion led her to reject a connection to God at a time when many call upon or deepen their faith. This sort of rejection of God may grow in reaction to the deeply seeded religious messages offered as absolutes.

Martina had clearly internalized enough of the destructive elements of the dominant doctrines that she saw no use for the God they purported to represent. Martina is not alone.

It troubles me that injurious theological ideas could prevent someone from seeking the comfort of God’s love. As one author has said, “Acknowledging the insights of the theological tradition while at the same time working to root out the elements of tradition that perpetuate diminishment and destruction is an ongoing task of theological interpretation.” This, I dare say, is Jesus’ healing message in today’s gospel.

Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.’

⁶ Jon Sobrino. *Where is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity and Hope.* (Orbis Books: New York, 2004), xxviii.

As we turn to look at the healing messages of Jesus as bringing God's love into the world, we see an alternative vision, one that centuries ago developed in the writing of Medieval Franciscan scholars Bonaventure and Scotus. Both men interpreting the incarnation first and foremost as an expression of God's love, not due singularly to human sinfulness.⁷

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.” Sin, we may be coming to see, is in blaming the victim. Jesus' miracle was as much giving the man sight as showing the disciples, showing us, how to see things differently. Perhaps one way to think about it is that healing isn't so much about avoiding or getting over an illness, tragedy, or misfortune as it is to know that we are loved and to see God as the source of all love.

Jesus' teaching can shake us out of the complacency of easy blame and finger pointing. It can redirect us toward healing, and our part in it. Whether she recognized it or not, God's love for her resided among Martina's family and circle of friends in attendance during her last days and in the voices of the doctors who finally prescribed palliative care for her.

As my friend Martina neared death, a close friend of hers read messages and poems of support to her at her bedside. One poem she read to her was this one about called “Praying,” by Mary Oliver:

⁷ William F. Short, OFM *The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition*. Working Paper.

Praying

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris,
it could be weeds in a vacant lot,
or a few small stones;
just pay attention,
then patch
a few words together
and don't try to make them
elaborate,
this isn't a contest
but the doorway
into thanks,
and a silence
in which another voice
may speak.

- Mary Oliver

For Martina and all who have died, we pray that they know the healing peace of rest. For all who suffer, we pray that they know the healing power of God's love. For our blindness, we pray that we are healed from the inertia of blame, toward agency in building up the world. Amen.

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