

WHO SINNED?

“Who sinned?”

Isn't it interesting how that was the very first thing Jesus' disciples said when they were walking along and encountered a man who had been blind since birth?

Not, “Rabbi, I feel sorry for that guy. He's lived his entire life unable to see, and maybe he never saw a breathtaking sunrise, the sparkling waters of the Sea of Galilee, or the loving smile of his mother.”

Not, “Jesus, isn't there something we can do to help that poor, blind beggar?”

No, the disciples weren't interested so much in how the blindness was inhibiting the man and preventing him from living a full and satisfying life as they were in knowing why he was blind in the first place. What had the blind man—or his parents—done, what sin had he or they committed, that angered God and caused God to inflict that adverse fate on him? Surely he had to have done something wrong to be the way he was.

Rabbi, who sinned?

We ask that question ourselves sometimes, don't we? In that sense, we're not all that different from Jesus' disciples. When we encounter people who aren't doing well, who are down on their luck or experiencing very difficult times, it's easy to think that they must have done something wrong, something bad, to deserve their hardship.

You know what I'm talking about, don't you? For example, when someone informs us that so-and-so has had a heart attack and the prognosis isn't very good, what's the thing many of us ask, either out loud or to ourselves? Why didn't he or she get more exercise? Or, I know he or she went to fast food places frequently and ate all that high fat junk food.

Who sinned?

Maybe we're driving along and see a grungy homeless man standing on the median, holding a sign that says, “Homeless. Please Help.” And the thought crosses our mind, “He doesn't need help. He's just lazy or lacks ambition. If he can stand there for six or eight hours a day asking for money, then he should be able to get a job, support himself and find a place to stay.”

Who sinned?

Or we might be at the grocery store, waiting in the checkout line to pay for our items, and there's a young woman in front of us with two young, runny-nosed kids in tow, buying her food with food stamps—or should I say a food assistance card? We can't help glancing suspiciously at the items in her grocery cart, and we immediately spot a package of *Oreo* cookies and a carton of ice cream, and we roll our eyes.

Then we think, “Why does she need food assistance? She looks healthy enough to work, earn a paycheck and buy her own food. If she'd studied harder in school or hadn't gotten pregnant—twice!—and became a single mother, she'd be able to buy her own Oreos and ice cream.

Who sinned?

There are times when we even turn that question on ourselves. For example, have you ever said something like this when your life hit a really rough patch: “God, what did I do to deserve this? Why are you punishing me?” Yes, we usually ask it out of frustration, fear or anger. And maybe we're not totally serious when we ask, because after all, we've heard in church that God doesn't work that way. And we definitely hope that's the case! But, be honest. Deep down inside, don't we really wonder?

We try to convince ourselves otherwise, and tell ourselves that our good and loving God wouldn't go around inflicting pain, suffering and tragedies on us or on other people if they mess up and don't live perfect lives. After all, Jesus said that God makes his sun to shine on both the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous alike. But even if we don't truly believe it, I think it's safe to say that, during those times when we're struggling with significant troubles and misfortunes in our lives, at least part of us can't help but wonder, and maybe even silently ask God, “Did I do something wrong? Are you angry or unhappy with me, and punishing me for some transgression I committed?

Who sinned? Did I?”

I've been wearing hearing aids for six or seven years or so, now. I wish I didn't need them. Sometimes they're uncomfortable, or feel like two large bugs are crawling around inside my ears. But I've accepted that I really do need them to help me to hear better. I know this because when I use them I don't say “What?” to my wife as much, which makes her happy. And you know the old saying, “Happy wife, happy life! And my hearing aids also allow me to catch more of what people are saying in meetings and downstairs during Neighboring; although I'll confess, that can be a mixed blessing!

What's interesting to me is that, when I think back on my visit to

the audiologist, I remember feeling compelled to ask her how I came to experience hearing loss. Why did I need hearing aids? Did I do something wrong early on in life?

Was it the loud rock music I used to listen to on my headphones or at concerts? Or maybe it was the firecrackers I set off when I was a youngster, and I didn't run far enough away from them before they went off (man, the explosion could really make my ears ring!). Or what about later on in life, not all that long ago, actually, when I used to mow the lawn and snow blow the driveway without wearing any protection for my hearing? Could any or all of those things be the reason why the audiologist encouraged me to purchase a pair of hearing aids? For a hefty sum, of course!

Who sinned? Did I?

Actually, it turns out that it was my parents who must have sinned, because I was told my hearing loss was most likely genetic!

We often ask the question, "Who sinned?" as though it was actually our job to judge—which is pretty foolish when you think about it, because we don't have the knowledge, wisdom or insight to make such a judgment about another human being. We haven't walked in the shoes of the people we're so willing to critique. We don't know what's in their hearts. We haven't lived their lives, seen things through their eyes or experienced the things they've experienced. And that's why we're simply not qualified to make those kinds of judgments as to whether another person sinned, or conclude that God must be pouring down God's wrath on them because of some wrongful act they committed.

Do I even have to say that we don't have God's omniscient wisdom and knowledge? We don't know God's intentions and what God ultimately has in mind for the people we all too quickly and effortlessly make judgments against. We don't know God's will enough to be able to conclude that God is punishing a particular person because they did something that was sinful or displeasing. Who sinned? Well, someone must have! Bad stuff doesn't just happen, does it?

Does it?

We often ask "Who sinned," but actually, nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus warn that if we're not holy and blameless, *karma* will come back to bite us. It's human beings who made that assumption. It's human beings who have concluded that God punishes people here on earth when they sin—therefore, when someone suffers or struggles with harsh events in their life, it's probably because they did something to warrant it.

Perhaps it's easier for us to accept the explanation that the pain and misfortune people experience are the result of God's punishment or discipline

than to accept that a lot of the pain and misfortune they suffer is random, indiscriminant, and has little or no understandable reason for happening. But, whether we want to accept it or not, many of the unpleasant things that happen to us and to our loved ones are arbitrary and haphazard. In other words: bad things can happen for no explainable reason, and they can happen to anyone—even good and loving people—at any time for no particular reason. We can speculate as to why they do, but the reality is, we may never know for certain why something bad happened to us or to someone else. In fact, the answer to why it happened may not even exist.

Who sinned? What if nobody did? What if the terrible misfortune or senseless tragedy we're trying to make sense of simply doesn't make any sense, and that's just the way it is?

That may be a difficult concept to swallow, but one positive thing can come out of it. And that is, if we accept that bad things can randomly, senselessly happen to us, to our loved ones and to any of God's children here on earth, even when they've done nothing at all to deserve it, then we might be more empathetic and caring toward them.

When we encounter a person who is going through a heartbreaking and tragic time and we know it's not a punishment and God didn't do it to them, then our reaction won't be to ask the judgmental question, "Who sinned?" but to instead realize that "There, but for the grace of God, go I." And we can ask instead, "What can I do to help them in their time of need, to comfort them, to minister to them in Christ's name?"

So, who sinned? The heart attack victim? The homeless person? The unmarried mother? The person on food assistance? Or is the real sinner the person who judges and puts down such people and says they're only getting what they deserve?

So, where do we go from here? If bad things happen to people for no discernable reason; if God isn't reprimanding them, but rather the tragedy that happens is just random and indiscriminant, what do we do with that? How do we respond?

I think Jesus gave us a clue. When his disciples asked him who it was that sinned—the man born blind from birth or his parents—Jesus said that the man's loss of vision had nothing to do with any sin or divine punishment. But Jesus went on to say there was a purpose to the man's tragedy. "He was born blind so that, through that misfortune, God's works might be revealed" to the spiritually blind Pharisees, and God would be glorified.

That puts a new spin on and gives us a different understanding about why bad things happen in the world. It seems they happen, not as an act of

divine punishment, but as an opportunity for God's people to glorify God and make God's presence known in the midst of bad circumstances and events. In other words, bad things happen, not to bring out harsh, judgmental attitudes in us, but to generate Christian compassion and a heartfelt response of loving ministry and care in Jesus' name.

In the mid to late 1980s, when the AIDS epidemic was raging and no one really knew very much about the disease, a family sat around the table during dinner one evening discussing the outbreak and the fear it instilled in people. The discussion eventually touched on the fact that the great majority of AIDS victims, at least in this country at that time, were gay people. And some of the family members expressed their belief that AIDS was God's way of punishing homosexuals for a lifestyle God disapproved of.

One of the family members, a college student home on school break, was outraged that members of her family, all of them very devout Christians, actually thought and believed that way. She interrupted their conversation and asked, "What if AIDS isn't God's punishment, but is just one of the many deadly diseases that randomly exist in the world. And what if God isn't expressing anger and disapproval against people with AIDS, but is waiting to see how compassionate and loving we will be in response to it?"

Who sinned?

It's an interesting question in response to tragedy, misfortune, and suffering, but it's the wrong question. Jesus made that quite clear. Instead of asking, "Who sinned?" in response to people's suffering and misfortune, Jesus showed us that there are two more appropriate questions to ask. "What can we do as followers of Christ to help or comfort the victims? And how might we bring glory to God in our response to their hardship, the way Jesus himself did?"

In this broken and hurting world, may we strive to ask the right question and seek the right answer. Amen.