### “Neither He Nor His Parents” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Mar. 20, 2022

**John 9:1–7**

1As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. 2His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” 3Jesus answered, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. 4We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. 5As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” 6When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, 7saying to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see.

**Luke 13:1–5**

1At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

The disciples are honestly seeking answers, even if, to *our* ears, their questions seem simplistic or unfair. They ask because they trust Jesus. Jesus gives the same answer in both of these stories. There is someone or some group that is afflicted. People wonder if they are being punished for their sins, or maybe their parents’ sins. “No,” is Jesus’ clear answer in both cases. People who are suffering are not being punished by God. It is all too common a practice to look at those who suffer and to say, like Job’s fair-weather friends, that they must have deserved it. But that is simply immature thinking. God does not make these things happen. God does not cause affliction. There are hurricanes, earthquakes, genetic defects, and other problems of nature that are built into the material facts of experience here on earth. God is not selecting people to afflict or punish.

There was a man born blind. Did he sin, or did his parents sin? Neither one, Jesus says, but God’s work can be revealed through him. As “the light of the world” (John 9:5), Jesus proceeds to heal him. Intriguingly, he uses the fellow’s own belief system, I think, when he makes mud with his spittle, wipes it on the guy’s eyes, and tells him to wash it off in the pool of Siloam. Many people believed in the magical power of a holy man’s spittle, and many also believed in the special power of the pool of Siloam. Jesus uses both these popular beliefs to help stimulate the guy’s faith. The guy approaches Siloam with his faith aroused, and that’s what Jesus wanted. Jesus as light of the world is not just about *Jesus*, it’s about how he affects *us*. He shines a light on our lives; he doesn’t arbitrarily change or disregard our existing beliefs. He meets us where we are in our own belief systems, and then lifts us up. Thus he helps us make spiritual progress.

In the other story, instead of being asked, Jesus himself raises the issue of whether unfortunate people were being punished. He asks them whether they think the people massacred by Pilate are worse than other sinners, or whether those on whom a tower fell are worse sinners. “No” is the answer, but you must repent or the same will happen to you (Luke 13:5). But, “no,” this didn’t happen to them because they were sinners.

People who suffer from accidents or from human violence are not guiltily paying for their sins. That’s not how it works. People then, and many people today, assume that those who suffer are being punished or corrected by God. But the fact is, there is a boatload of unjust suffering on earth.

There are plenty of situations that need to be addressed by human compassion, fairness, justice, and wisdom. There are abused children. There are beaten wives. There are bullied students. There are bullied countries, like Ukraine right now. None of these people are paying some kind of karmic debt, nor are they being taught a lesson by God. People sometimes like to let themselves off the hook by saying that those who suffer are being taught a lesson, but this is just the hard-hearted attitude of those who don’t want to worry about the suffering of others. This, too, is a type of bullying—making yourself feel better, while labeling others as deserving pain.

The only commandment Jesus gives in either of these passages is to “repent.” Maybe we should repent of our tendency to write off those who suffer by saying “they must have done something to deserve it.” Maybe we should repent of our intellectual laziness that enables us to write people off.

It is hard work to really think about what causes suffering, whether unjust and oppressive actions have caused it, and what we could do about it. It may be hard to straighten out all the facts, but in cases of human cruelty and violence, it should be clear who is at fault. We *are* actually our brother’s keeper (Gen 4:9), and every act of kindness is a step in the right direction.

Sometimes forgiveness is appropriate, sometimes the emphasis needs to be on stopping the violence. St. Patrick, who was an Englishman, forgave the Irishmen who took him captive and made him a slave when he was young. He eventually escaped and got back to England, where he underwent training to become a pastor. He spent his mature years preaching to the Irish and winning them over to the new faith. He used the three-leafed clover as a symbol of the Trinity, taking its three-in-one form to stand for the three distinct persons in the one Godhead.

One legend says he lit a fire on a hill in defiance of a pagan king and of the Druid priests. The legend of him driving the snakes out of Ireland is probably a metaphor for his having broken the power of the Druids. Ireland has never had snakes. Despite the legends, the story of Patrick still presents us with a useful tale of someone who had a place in his heart for the Irish, wanting to bring them to Christ, and who had significant success in that effort—another example where just *one* person’s kindness changed the world.

Maybe the way that Patrick used a familiar thing like a shamrock to speak about God can be compared to the way that Jesus used spittle and the pool of Siloam to reach the superstitious man he was healing. They reached people where they were, using images or items that people would understand. Jesus will reach you wherever you are, and whatever your inherited ideas.

That doesn’t mean he wouldn’t like to improve some of your ideas, like the one about thinking that people who suffer are paying for their sins. That’s an idea he rejects. That would involve a God who is heavily invested in judging and punishing people, of “putting them in their place.” But he wants us to think of God as a loving Father, who explicitly did *not* judge the prodigal son who finally came back, and who does not judge the person lying injured in a ditch, but does what he can to *minister* to him, as the good Samaritan did. Trust that God will minister to *your* deepest needs, too.

Find a quiet place and take a moment to share with God your thoughts, your honest questions. God and Jesus are ready to listen. Trust and give all your cares to Jesus.