

JOB 34:10-21

Hear me, those of you who have sense. Far be it from God that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty that he should do wrong. For according to their deeds, he will repay them, and according to their ways he will make it befall them. Of a truth, God will not do wickedly and the Almighty will not pervert justice. Who gave him charge over the earth and who laid on him the whole world? If he should take back his spirit to himself, and gather to himself his breath, all flesh would perish together and all mortals return to dust.

If you have understanding, hear this, listen to what I say. Shall one who hates justice govern? Will you condemn one who is righteous and mighty, who says to a king, "You scoundrel!" and to princes, "You wicked men!"; who shows no partiality to nobles, nor regards the rich more than the poor, for they are all the work of his hands? In a moment they die; at midnight thy people are shaken and pass away, and the mighty are taken away by no human hand. For his eyes are upon the ways of mortals, and he sees all their steps.

MATTHEW 7:15-20

Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but are inwardly ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, you will know them by their fruits.

THE BLAME GAME

Job 34:10-21
Matthew 7:15-20

In condemning the Paris terrorist attacks in 2015, His Holiness the Dalai Lama said that the world must not ask God to fix man-made problems. In further explaining, he said, “We cannot solve this problem only through prayers. I am a Buddhist and I believe in praying. But humans have created this problem, and now we are asking God to solve it. It is illogical. God would say, solve it yourself because you created it in the first place.” I believe he was referring to “tough love.”

And isn't it when we feel overwhelmed, powerless and hopeless that we throw our hands into the air and cry out, “Fix this, God!” Because we don't know where else to turn. Heaven knows that we cannot count on politicians to produce solutions. For even when they do come up with good ideas that just might be effective if everyone worked together, various factions quickly rise up in opposition pushing gigantic boulders onto the tracks to prevent any progress. And then when they offer their own proposals, the other sides seek revenge and push their own boulders onto the track and so it goes endlessly. May I introduce you to immigration policy?

So then what? Do we think we can beseech the Almighty and the Almighty will do what? Come down with fire and brimstone and vanquish those who stand in our way? And when those prayers go unanswered, it is only a small step to blame God for (A) not fixing things; and for (B) not stopping us when we were creating all of our woes in the first place. And then we have the audacity to threaten the Almighty by saying, “If you don't do this for me, I won't believe in you anymore.”

Not only does this blaming of God occur across the board on national and cultural scales, it happens on very personal levels as well. Several years ago, I counseled with a man who was very distraught over the premature death of his father from a particularly fatal lung disease. The singular cure available to him was a transplant and because he was only in his

early 60's and otherwise very healthy, he met the criteria to receive a healthy lung. When he became number 5 on the national wait list, he was airlifted to Cleveland to begin the preparations. After he was there for two weeks, he reached the coveted position of the "Next" potential recipient. But in the meantime, his health was declining and it became a day-to-day, and then hour-to-hour excruciating "Please, God!" vigil. The race against time was coming down to the wire. The transplant staff remained hopeful and encouraged him to just hang in there because it could not possibly be much longer. He never made it to the finish line, dying of cardiac arrest on Easter morning.

Who could not empathize with my client's intense grief and feelings of helplessness, despair and anger. His father had been his best friend. But two years later he had not been able to move on. He had, in fact, been a regular church-goer, but had ceased all religious practice because he blamed God for taking his father away from him. Prayer didn't work and God didn't understand anything and if He did exist, He certainly did not care about him. To hell with God!

Oh, my goodness, how many issues does this raise? The first, of course, is my client's narcissism in viewing himself as the most important person in the world. I wonder if he ever considered whose life was saved because they moved up to the "Next" spot on the transplant list when his father died. To whom was that individual important? And to pray for God to hurry up meant that somebody with a healthy lung would have to die to accommodate his wishes.

There were a lot of potential candidates for blame in this situation. For even though his father did not personally do anything to jeopardize his lungs—he never smoked a cigarette in his life—but both of his parents were chain smokers. Were they to blame? Perhaps, but in all fairness, we should then look at the generation in which they grew up when smoking was actually considered healthy and well over 50% of the population was addicted. Or what about the medical profession which was very slow to warn of smoking's adverse effects; and the

tobacco industry which suppressed the research that revealed it. And what about the government? Was it an innocent bystander in all of this as our politicians accepted large donations to keep it silent? How far back do you want to go? What about the drugstores which sold it and the farmers who grew it? We could play the Blame Game forever. But the question is, how does God, then, become the chief offender?

Another issue madly waving its hand with a question is whether God is capable of evil. My client felt neglected and uncared for which in his narcissistic world was tantamount to evil. But how many people who have suffered injustices they could in no way feel they deserved have prayed to God for revenge on their adversaries? Do they really believe that God will take up their cause by inflicting evil consequences on others which will most certainly lead to more prayers for revenge and plenty of unintended consequences on innocent people who are simply in the wrong place at the wrong time? I believe the military refers to it as “collateral damage.”

What do our Scriptures this morning have to teach us about this Blame Game? The author of Job raises this and many other theological problems in his provocative story about the man who was regarded by God as the most righteous person on earth and then became the subject of Satan’s destructive powers after he made a bet with God that Job would not remain faithful if he suffered numerous and unjustified calamities. You know the story. In the aftermath of losing home, his family, his flocks and becoming afflicted with disease, two of Job’s friends call him out, suggesting in no uncertain terms that he must have done *something* to deserve God’s wrath. And Job, as we know, denies everything and has a major crisis of faith in the God he has so selflessly served.

But in our passage, the third friend, Elihu, takes a middle road interpretation of these events. *Hear me, those of you who have sense. Far be it from God that he should do wickedness, and from the Almighty that he should do wrong...Of a truth, God will not do wickedly and the Almighty will not pervert justice. For according to their deeds he will repay them, and according to their ways he will make it befall them.*

So, on the one hand, he absolves God from being behind any of this travesty, but on the other hand, he definitely implies that one eventually gets what one deserves. Is he contradicting himself? I don't think so. All the major religions have observed that there seems to be a universal law at work which operates like a boomerang. What you throw out there—good or evil—comes back to you. The Buddhists call it karma.

And in our New Testament, we hear Jesus saying the same thing. *Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but are inwardly ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

Where we seem to be headed here is that asking God to come to our rescue when we have created our own problems is not only futile, but actually exacerbates the inflammation. Why? Because then God gets blamed and we never take responsibility for cleaning up our messes. Metaphysician Louise Hay famously said, "Blame is always off the track." She was right. What do we gain through blame? The one blamed is not led to enlightenment and the one blaming exists in a negative energy and the situation at hand is further poisoned. May I reintroduce to immigration reform?

And we have to understand—as we all logically do—that every life will have experiences of loss, betrayal, injury, illness, embarrassment and lots more. We are never going to eliminate those experiences and trying to figure out who is responsible for our pain and attempting to make them pay is counterproductive to our spiritual growth. In fact, it will only bear bad fruit. The way we bear good fruit and keep our trees healthy and productive is to work with what we have been given. The way we overcome evil is not by producing more of it, but by transcending it with love.

In conclusion, I want to end where we began by continuing on with the words of the Dalai Lama: "We need a systematic approach to foster humanistic values of oneness and

harmony. If we start doing it now there is hope that this century will be different from the previous one. It is in everybody's interest. So, let us work for peace within our families and society and not expect help from God, Buddha or the government."

Does that mean we stop praying? Does that mean God doesn't care? Of course not! But what it does mean is that we pray for wisdom, the ability to use our creative minds to find solutions, the selflessness to listen to the ideas and opinions of others and to put our shoulders to the wheel, stop the finger pointing and get to work.

Reverend Thomas Dunlap September 30, 2018