

Cause and Effect

Luke 13:1-9

I don't know if you happened to catch the op-ed in Friday's *New York Times*, written by a practicing Catholic who is planning to give up his pew for Lent.¹ Though most Baptists I know don't tend to give up their pew for anything (including visitors!) mainly for territorial reasons, for traditional Catholics giving up theirs is much more spiritual—and doing so is perceived as roughly equivalent to adding another brick on the road to Purgatory! First, they give up Latin Masses, and then fish on Fridays, then weekly visits to confession; then they put away their rosaries, and now they're abandoning their presence at Church altogether? What will become of Roman Catholicism as we once knew it?

The op-ed writer, Paul Elie, tried to relieve all the furrowed brows of worried mothers and grandmothers by noting this abandonment was only for a short time—a bit of Lenten housecleaning, so to speak—an opportunity to stand aside and address the deep feelings of despair in the hearts of many Catholics that accompany the sudden resignation of Pope Benedict.

Resignation: that's what American Catholics are feeling about our faith. We are resigned to the fact that so much in the Roman Catholic Church is broken and won't be fixed anytime soon. So if the pope can resign, we can, too. We should give up Catholicism en masse, if only for a time. ...We should seize this opportunity to ask what is true in our faith, what it costs us in obfuscation and moral compromise, and what its telos, or end purpose, really is. And we should explore other religious traditions, which we understand poorly. ²

¹ Paul Elie, "Give Up Your Pew for Lent," *New York Times*, Friday, March 1, 2013.

² Ibid.

In many respects, I feel for my Catholic friends because so much of this sacred institution they have loved and trusted has broken their hearts. I realize that much of what is an evident crisis in Catholicism can also be a common concern for all churches, and in organized religion in general, although it affects some more than others. Religious people are all subject to great resignation when the institutions they have loved betray them or the communities we have tried to create are broken or in need of spiritual repair.

It's hard to identify and catalogue all the crimes and causes for this institutional despair. In many ways, it's similar to when children grow up and discover just how human and flawed their parents or elders are. The idealism of childhood breaks down and innocent love gets replaced by a much wiser one. The simple moralisms of right and wrong are replaced by nuances of need and desire; what was black and white is now painted in grays. A mature approach to life involves more compromises to our expectations than we'd like to admit. In light of all the hidden secrets and façade of holiness, many Catholics are asking the Church to change and be held accountable and to recognize the children have grown up and they can be treated like adults.

Certainly, we all want our churches to be safe and sacred places, deserving of the trust we invest in them. But sometimes in the desire to uphold the ideal, religious people overlook or even hide what's all too real—the scarred human underbelly of the Church—the wounded part of Christ—the people who have been abused and harmed in myriad ways. The tragic stories expose terrible, horrible acts of violence such as physical or sexual abuse, but more common are the

psychological, spiritual, and verbal judgments present in how people treat each other, even those we know we love. Words and harsh criticism can wound people nearly as deeply as other terrible types of abuse; yet it's more common to simply dismiss the impact of this as merely due to the personality of the offender, rather than for that person to be called out by others to seek forgiveness and reconcile. But when people are hurt by the very people who are there to give them hope in life, it's not surprising there is despair and disillusion. It isn't just the institutions of Catholicism that have covered up these sins; we've all done it in varying ways.

Perhaps that's why we need a season like Lent to remind us of the need for repentance—the *metanoia* that beckons people to wake up to reality and turn things around. It's not just our own personal repentance that's called for; many are recognizing that religious institutions and communities themselves need to repent for the harm that has been done to people. We are all challenged by this as people of faith—to be mindful of how we are all contributors (or detractors) to the atmosphere and spiritual climate of our faith community—how we represent the spirit of Christ to each other and to all who join us in what is intended to be a spiritually safe place.

Now the reason I bring this up is because this is not only relevant to our times, but it's also the message we would receive from our lectionary text for today. It may not be obvious at first, but it is implicit in what Jesus was conveying to those who were quick to point out the sins of others, and not recognize the reality of their own. Those who did this (at least as Luke conveyed it) did so in ways typical to their times (and perhaps even to ours) by citing terrible

tragedies that occurred—the stuff that makes the headlines, so to speak—and then casting aspersions on the victims, with the effect of blaming their moral character for the resulting crimes against them. It is a classic cause-and-effect analysis that results in blaming the victim—something that seems to occur with great regularity in society and sadly within our religious institutions.

Let's suppose, for the sake of argument, that the cultural differences and rivalry between Judeans and Galileans were similar to what Protestants and Catholics have experienced throughout the centuries—each certain that their loyalty and faithfulness to God exceeds that of the other. With that rivalry in mind, it's not surprising then that, while in Jerusalem, Jesus was told by Judeans about some Galileans who had been killed by Pilate while coming to the temple, euphemistically stated as: “whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.” One might think this horrible and outrageous act should have resulted in a condemnation of Pilate, the cruel Roman governor, leading to cries for justice against his abuse of power. Instead, the opposite happened: apparently, those around Jesus were pointing their fingers at the Galileans for desecrating the temple. It was a clear, absurd case of “blaming the victim.” (Mind you, had they been Judeans, it's quite likely they would have risen up with fury against the powers that be!)

Jesus flushed this out by calling them on it, questioning them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” Or in effect, was Pilate justified for killing them, or even more to the point, did God allow this to happen because they were deserving of it? Before we dismiss

this as nonsense, remember how often we see the same in our cause-and-effect world, e.g. blaming and judging rape victims for inviting the crime, especially in cases where the offender is a celebrity or powerful and influential; or, where people question the motives for why victims come forward years later with accusations about sexual abuse against leaders in the church. Sadly, it's easier, and more common, to blame the victims than to take on the offenders, especially if we value the institution and what it represents.

The second situation was similar—a tower had fallen and killed eighteen people—apparently, big news. The common perception was that such a random tragedy had a moral reason behind it—God's purpose was to punish these people. Again, it seems ridiculous, but how often do tragedies, even natural disasters, get explained with stupid moralisms? (The victims must have done something to deserve it! It was a clear message from God!).

In both cases, Jesus responded by dismissing their quick judgments and, in effect, telling them, with this kind of moral logic and analysis, everyone should perish, including them! Everyone should expect something horrible to happen to them, if a victim's sin is the cause behind it. Simple moralisms of cause-and-effect—of human sin and divine punishment—are not only stupid and inadequate when applying them to the tragedies of life, but they are cruel and unjust when they're done to avoid holding the real offenders accountable, even if you have little empathy for the victims.

Then Jesus did an interesting thing. He told the parable of an unproductive fig tree, which the landowner was going to cut down for being worthless. That is, until his gardener intervened and told him

to give him another chance to fix the problem, which he would do by shoveling some manure around its roots to see if it might fertilize some growth in another season. Gardeners know that manure has that fertilizing effect on plant life.

How did that relate to what had just been said? In what way did this associate with his message of not blaming victims and being mindful that everyone needs to repent and change their ways?

Well, it appears Jesus shifted the focus away from evaluating or speculating on the sins or reasons behind terrible acts and tragedies to the responsibility each person has to produce goodness in their own right—hence, the reason to repent. Instead of making judgments about the causes of someone else’s troubles and problems, it was more important to focus on the desired effects in your own life.

If that’s true, then there’s a message implicit to this parable which has to do with his detail about the manure. That is, there’s a lot of [excrement] that happens to people over the course of their life. Most of it is terrible stuff—the very crap we want to get rid of, the stuff we never want to hear about, the awful messes we don’t want to deal with. But it happens all the time and it makes a mess of a lot of lives. I’m willing to wager that Jesus might have included this detail about the manure because of what it implied: that all the horrible things that happen to us, all the stuff we want to discard and never see again, can actually be used as fertilizer for our souls, stimulating spiritual growth in us if we allow it to!

Think about it. This is the stuff that helps us learn the lessons of life, or to reach a *metanoia* moment that requires repentance and a change within us or around us—not just as individuals, but as entire

institutions—in order to redeem what has become rather worthless. Instead of hiding it, or covering it up, ignoring it, or shamefully denying it, use it to make yourselves wiser, more insightful, more merciful, more humble, more accountable, and more honest about how life operates in the real world! That is where spiritual growth occurs. If we give it time, if we give our due diligence, then we can move on and hopefully produce the kind of good works and good character that's necessary to overcome all that's happened.

Again, this kind of redemption isn't just relevant to personal lives that have gone haywire—it also is pertinent to the institutions that carry our faith and values and our sense of the holy, and yet betray us all the time. At certain moments, we are called to face the terrible messes of our lives and the failures of our institutions, deal with them as they are, view the bad as excrement that has no other purpose other than to give us teachable moments to learn from and somehow move on trying to be better than we are.

It's not a child-like cause-and-effect world where everything is locked into simple moralisms of right and wrong, good and evil, pure and impure, holy and profane, sacred versus shameful—no simple moralisms apply. Human life exists in a dynamic, messed-up world, within and outside of its holy and sacred places; facing that reality is what provides us ample opportunity to fix what's wrong for the betterment of us all. Whatever causes our messes in the first place can result in a different, even better, effect in the long run, if we have the courage to face our demons and fix our problems. The ultimate judgment of life awaits another season to see if something good will emerge and bring some value to an otherwise wasted period. That's

what redemption is, and what it's meant for, and why repentance is so deeply imbedded in the process of accountability, so people can learn from their mistakes, and those who can will find something good come from them. It's what the future holds that counts, if it at all can count for something good.

If I were a Catholic, I wouldn't permanently leave the Church at this time—no matter how much you might be justified in doing so. Instead, I'd follow Paul Elie's advice and just take a short Lenten hiatus. Why? Because something good can arise out of this low point. Just like an investor, when the market is down, you can whine about all the causes for the losses and tell the world you will never buy another stock; or you can buy when it's low, invest yourself in its growth, and wait for it to rise in value again. That's what Catholics might want to do in this season of Lent; wait for the Church to face its problems, repent from that which has brought them to this low point, and then make something good come from it. It's a season of repentance for the Church.

The same holds true for anyone, including us. Turn the mistakes and misgivings and messes in our own world into the stuff that will turn us around to become more faithful and more fruitful in the future. For by doing this, we will realize for every cause and effect, there actually is a measure of hope and redemption that defies even the common expectations of life and nature. That is measure of grace, and it's precisely what God offers us, so that we never give up on our faith or on the very sacred and very human communities with which we share it.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes, Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
3 March 2013