

Date: July 30, 2006

SUNDAY: Ordinary 17

SERMON: Guessing at Grace

Text(s): 2 Samuel 12:15-25; Mark 6:45-56

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“The Lord struck the child so that it became very ill.” Did that statement bother you when we read it this morning? It certainly bothered me. It's such a shocking statement! (Mary chose a good week to be away on vacation; I'm the one stuck with dealing with this particular text). It just stops you cold when you read it. "The Lord struck the child." What kind of God is it who strikes down innocent children for the sins of their fathers?

Now if the narrator of this story had said, “The Lord struck David and he became very ill,” we'd have hardly given it a second thought, except perhaps to say, “And it served him right.” It would have served him right, wouldn't it? As we've seen during the past few weeks, David was the one who was responsible for this whole mess. It was his lust for another man's wife, his arrogance, his abuse of his power that led to this whole soap opera. David rapes Bathsheba and she becomes pregnant, and then to cover up his crime, he has her husband murdered so he can legally add Bathsheba to his harem. So if the biblical writer had said that it was David whom the Lord struck, we might even have stood up and applauded and felt that there was some justice in the universe after all.

But this— “The Lord struck the child,”— what kind of justice is this? It sticks in our craw. Who can believe in, much less love, a God who strikes down innocent children to punish their fathers?

If we think about it for a moment, however, we'll realize that there's only one part of this statement that we find shocking. It's not the part about the innocent child suffering for its parent's sins. That awakens our sorrow, our sympathy, our compassion, even our anger at the injustice of it all, but we know that happens all

the time. A quick visit to the intensive care neonatal unit at most hospitals will confirm that. There we commonly find premature, damaged babies in desperate condition because their mothers were crack cocaine addicts or alcoholics or had AIDS. And the pictures that came back to us from Iraq or Lebanon or Darfur of little children killed or wandering about dazed and frightened and orphaned in the ruins of their bombed homes leave us no doubt that innocent children suffer for the sins of adults all the time. It's dreadful, but we know it happens and has always happened.

No, the part of the statement that really sticks in our craw is the part about God striking the child. That's the stumbling block that trips us up.

There are a few considerations that may help us get past this statement just long enough to avoid giving up on God altogether or flinging our Bibles at the wall in disgust.

First, it may help to remind ourselves of the refrain from that old song from the musical *Porgy and Bess*: “It ain't necessarily so; the things that you're liable to read in the Bible, it ain't necessarily so.” Contrary to the assertion of both Jewish and Christian fundamentalists, the Bible, while it is sacred scripture to both faiths, did not drop out of heaven; it is not divine speech, but is a thoroughly a human product. People wrote the biblical texts. Their understandings of what God did or didn't do, or what God willed or didn't will are just that—their understandings. We no longer, for example, believe as the author of Deuteronomy did, that wearing clothing made from two different fabrics or planting two different crops in the same field are abominations that will incur Divine wrath or punishment. The scriptures are sacred for the witness they bear to the ways of God as perceived through the faith of our ancestors, but each new generation has to do the work of interpretation for its own time, its own culture and context and come to its own conclusions about what it is that God is up to in the world. In fact, our own denomination, the United Church of Christ, has

adopted as a motto, “God is still speaking,” which is another way of saying that we have to do the work of interpreting the scriptures anew for our own time and place, while seriously attending to, and sometimes critiquing, the work that previous generations of the faithful have done before us.

The ancient Hebrews, unlike us Westerners who are more indebted to the Greeks for our way of looking at the world, didn't bother to distinguish, as we've learned to do, between primary and secondary causes, or between intermediate and ultimate causes. Ancient Hebrew culture was much less nuanced in that respect than Greek and subsequent Western culture. They were a little like modern insurance companies that refer to natural disasters such as floods or tornadoes as “acts of God.” Insurance companies don't get into meteorology; they just ascribe the whole thing to the First Cause, God, and are done with it. Of course, the insurance companies aren't really attempting to make a theological statement, whereas the biblical writers were expressing their deepest understandings of how God worked in the world.

That may help us see, at least partially, where such a bald statement “The Lord struck the child” comes from. The biblical writer wasn't making light of David's complicity or guilt in the matter. But neither was he equipped either by scientific knowledge or cultural world-view to take into account any diseases that might have been responsible for the undoubtedly high rate of infant mortality in that medically primitive society. He was simply, in his own culturally-specific, time-bound way of thinking, going straight to the ultimate cause. When something tragic happens for which there is no known cause, you go back to the cause behind and before all causes— God. It's simple, and it helps to make sense of an otherwise intolerable situation.

Allied with this there is also the notion found in some parts of the Old Testament, that

the responsibility for the actions of an individual is shared by the community of which that individual is a part. “The sins of the fathers are visited on the children to the third and fourth generation, says the writer of Exodus.” We highly individualized westerners have a hard time with that notion of collective identity and responsibility, though it is fairly common in tribal cultures where group identity is more the rule than individual identity. And, indeed, later writers, like the prophet Ezekiel challenged this notion that God punishes the descendants of a person who has done evil. The Bible speaks with many voices, not only a single one.

Not every theological affirmation in the Bible is a good one; there's a lot of bad theology expressed as well. For Christians, our test for what is good and what is bad is what we believe we have come to understand about God in light of Jesus the Christ. That means, that some affirmations about God's ways, like this one, even though they're in the Bible, may need to be questioned or even discarded.

And yet, before we're too quick to simply dismiss this horrible statement, “The Lord struck the child,” we may have to recognize that at an emotional, if not an intellectual level, it may be a fairly accurate statement about the way even we moderns often feel about God or about the bad things that happen to us or to others. How often have you caught yourself saying, or heard someone else saying in the face of inexplicable tragedy, “Well, everything happens for a reason?” Hardly a week goes by that I don't hear that sentiment expressed by someone who's been dealt a blow by life. There's something deep inside us that seeks to bring order and pattern to the seemingly random bad things that happen to us. We don't seem to look for a reason as often when good things happen, do we? Those we are more likely to attribute either to our own achievements or to our good fortune— to luck— or to God's blessing and simply accept them. But when bad or inexplicable and tragic things

happen, we start looking for reasons to help us make sense of it. And of course, that very search implies that God is somehow behind what has happened, that we're being punished for something we've done wrong, even if we don't know what it is. Emotionally, if not culturally or intellectually, we may not be as far as we think we are from those ancient Hebrews in ascribing our troubles to God's will.

The reason that David perceives for his child's illness is clear; he knows he's responsible for the child being there in the first place, and every time he looks at that child, he's reminded of his sin of murder and arrogance and violence. So when the child becomes ill, no doubt that statement accurately reflects the way David feels about it. "God is punishing me," he thinks. And he then does what many of us do when we have similar feelings. He tries to strike a bargain with God. "See, God," he's saying, "I'll starve myself; I'll humiliate myself; I'll endure discomfort if you'll only make the child well." Don't we try to strike similar bargains with God? "God if you'll only get me out of this jam, I'll go to church more often," or "I promise I'll never smoke another cigarette."

David bargains, as we all have a tendency to do. God is punishing him, he believes, by striking his child. His emotional state must be pretty terrible since we're told that when the child dies, his servants don't want to tell him because they're afraid he'll harm himself. But here the story takes an unexpected twist. David surprises them when the news of the child's death doesn't drive him to self-destruction, but to ready acceptance of what he considers to be this rough justice of God.

His answer to their surprise gives us the clue to his feelings. "*While the child was alive, I fasted and wept, for I thought, 'Who knows? God may be gracious to me and the child may live. But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back to me?'*" This is David the realist. He knows he's sinned, he's accepting

the consequences, or at least what he perceives to be the consequences. He doesn't fault what he believes to be the just judgment of God. He accepts what is and moves on. God has conformed to David's expectations of God. God hasn't done anything that David is surprised at. He offended God, so God punished him by taking his child's life. That's a very simple theology. It's also a very bad theology, but its very simplicity makes it appealing. There's even a perverse sort of fairness in it, isn't there? After all, who can understand God. "Who knows? God may be gracious. But if not, I can't say I didn't have it coming to me." You can't figure God out. You can only guess at God's ways. Who knows? Maybe God will be gracious.

That's David. That's us, too, much of the time, isn't it? Guessing at grace. Hoping that God will treat us well, but not really expecting it. Feeling that God must know something about us that makes us deserve whatever bad thing is happening to us, even if many times, we don't know what it is ourselves. Or even worse, if we do know what it is we've done or are doing that's wrong to evoke that emotional response, "God is punishing me."

So when the worst happens, like David we gird up our loins and get on with life, because there's really nothing else we can do, is there. God may be gracious, we guess, but then again God may demand retribution for whatever evils we're supposed to have committed. And we just won't know until it happens to us. And then we'll deal with it as best we can.

I sometimes wonder what might have been the future of that little child had it lived. I wonder if David could ever have looked on its face without the painful memory of his sin. Could Bathsheba ever have clasped that child to her breast without remembering the pain of the violence she suffered which brought that child into being? Would that child ever have been loved or wanted? Perhaps that's a modern way of looking at it that would have been meaningless to

someone back in that time. I don't know. Like David, like any of us, I can only guess at God's grace from the small bit of it that I have experienced.

But David's guessing at grace is not the end of the story. His realistic acceptance of what is, even though his understanding of its cause may be wrong, is healthy. After receiving the bad news of the child's death, David goes to console his new wife Bathsheba. Somehow, through all this mess, Bathsheba is the forgotten person. Her feelings are never really described. But then this story was written by a man in a strongly patriarchal society, so we couldn't expect a woman's feelings to be given much shrift. But we do get some hints. Whatever David may feel about the rough justice he has received, Bathsheba is no doubt doing what any mother would do, she's grieving for her lost child. And perhaps David's ordeal has newly sensitized him to Bathsheba's feelings, for he goes to console her. And this time, when they come together, it's not in the violence of a rape, but in the tenderness of sympathy, of a shared pain and loss, in love rather than in lust. And it's in this mutual sharing of their common loss that David and Bathsheba experience what before this, David could only guess at—the true nature of God as a God of grace whose love is always at work to restore and reconcile those persons and situations that are broken.

Bathsheba conceives again, and this time, she brings forth a son whom they name Solomon. But though that's the name we know him by, the Lord sends word to David by his prophet Nathan, that he's to be given another name as well—Jedidiah, which means “Beloved of the Lord.”

Perhaps the grace of God is so mysterious and opaque to us because it is more far-seeing, more profound, more deeply redemptive than we can readily imagine. Perhaps we will always be only able to guess at it, limited as we are by time and space and our own ignorance and our own human failures. And perhaps we only can begin

to experience that grace within and in the midst of the hurts and tragedies and sins in our lives when we, like David, have confessed both our failures and our ignorance and moved on in acceptance to make a new beginning through an act of love. An old Pentecost hymn suggests that this is so:

*And so the yearning strong
With which the soul doth long,
Shall far outpass the power of
human telling.
For none may guess its grace
Till Love creates a place
Wherein the Holy Spirit makes a
dwelling.*