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Date: July 12, 2020
Sermon: "Lessons Learned During Covid-19"
Scripture: Luke 13:1-5; John 9:1-3
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Luke 13:1-5

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or 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? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'

John 9:1-3

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.'

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote one of the most popular religious books of the last 50 years, *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*. As a pastor of 50 years' experience, I can tell you it—or its shorter variations, "Why do bad things happen?" or just plain "Why?"—is just about *the* most asked question people ask.

Such questions are rooted in 500 years of human and religious experience. From the beginning of time, across every single religion, there has been this idea—some would say this *hope*; others would say this *fear*—that God runs everything. It's at the heart of the Hindu idea of "karma." It's why Muslims always say "Inshallah," "God willing." It's throughout the Judeo-Christian Bible. God causes floods and earthquakes and military defeats and plagues just as surely as God causes good weather, good crops, and good victories. God runs

everything. God is in control. Certainly I was taught in Confirmation class the "Three O's of God": God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. God is all-powerful, all knowing, and everywhere.

One year in seminary I had to teach a Confirmation class. We'd only just done those "Three O's of God," and a week or so later, all the kids quit Confirmation class. Well, I tracked them all down. It turned out their eighth-grade classmate had been walking in the rain, delivering newspapers house to house, got struck and killed by a car. The kids wanted to know if God is omnipotent, all-powerful, why didn't God stop it? If God is omniscient, all knowing, why didn't God stop it? If God is omnipresent, everywhere, why wasn't he there on that street to stop it? To one degree or another, out loud or in our hearts, we ask that question from time to time.

Here we are in mid-July, our fifth month of Covid-19 pandemic chaos, and our second month of national reckoning with racism. Our nation is in disarray, our cities torn apart, our economy disrupted, our citizens numb and enraged and fearful. It is fair to ask, "Where is God in all this?" Did God create it, do it, ordain it, cause it, control it, guide it, use it? Or is God on the sidelines, observing, watching? Or is God in the middle of it along with us, working to get us through it? And, as a Church of faith, as people trying to be Christlike, where are we in it? And what can we learn from it? Or is it all Shakespeare's "sound and fury, signifying nothing," just lost months, lost dreams, lost lives?

For my money, you've heard me use the great quote, "Jesus is the near end of God." If you wonder what God is like or what God would do or if the idea of God is too big or too removed, look at Jesus. "Jesus is the near end of God." And I'll take one step further: "Church is the near end of Jesus." People ought to be able to look at Church and know what Jesus is like, what Jesus would do. "Church is the near end of Jesus." In other words, we should reflect Jesus's approach to things. In doing so, we'll know God is in the middle of this with us, and we can learn a thing or two.

Which brings us to our two short Bible stories for today. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus refers to a local tragedy; evidently a building collapsed, killing 18 people, and so Jesus is asked what everyone else is thinking: did those 18 people deserve it? Had they done something to anger God? Did God do it? (Luke 13:3-5) "No," Jesus says. But it is a useful warning that life is short and fragile. Then, in John's Gospel, Jesus meets a blind man. The Disciples immediately link his blindness to his sinfulness. They asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:1-3)

There's that old thought that if there's something wrong in your life, God is getting back at you, or your family, or your town, or your nation, or something.

If you remember the classic story of Job, he suffered so much, literally lost everything: home, family, career, health, all taken from him. When his friends came to visit, they eventually got around to what they truly believed. They told Job point blank, "For all this bad stuff to happen, you must deserve it."

Jesus's point of view is that God doesn't do bad stuff; it goes against God's grain. Bad stuff isn't God's essence. But bad stuff gives us a chance to learn, to grow, to think things through, to improve.

We've been through five months of national crisis. But as the saying goes, "This isn't our first rodeo." Epidemics have hurt us before. Racial injustice has been obvious before. Are there any lessons learned that can advance us beyond where we've been and still are? How many lives lost till they matter? An old person in a nursing home? A Black man on the street corner? The shop owner on Main Street? Lessons? Well, here are a few:

One, we are all in this together. We've tried making this the "Chinese virus." We've tried thinking, "Thank God we're not Italy." Then we tried to red state/blue state everything. First, only blue states got it. Now, red states have it. Then, only blue-staters wear masks; red-staters want to reopen. Now, red-staters are wearing masks and closing down.

So maybe we need to get back to reality. People are getting sick, our health system is stressed, vulnerable people are dying, the economy is upset, schools are in an uproar, and people still think they have a God-given right to belly up to the bar and slobber all over the five people next to them.

No! Our God-given right is to use our God-given brain to look out for one another, as we would have them look out for us. Do you know why people are still fighting over the Civil War? Over statues and flags and Army Base names? Because we weren't in it together. By definition, a Civil War is me on one side, you on the other! One good, one bad; one wins, one loses. The end result was we were torn asunder, not mended together.

You've seen it in your own life, and family, and business, among friends, around town. Some crisis comes along, some setback, some problem, and people are either drawn together, or they pull apart. Whether it's standing tall to say Black lives matter, or putting on a mask because an elderly life matters, whether it's advocating for justice or common sense, when we're in it together, we are stronger.

Two, we are smarter than we act sometimes. There was a period during this crisis—it didn't last long—but for a short time, hard ideologues of the left and right softened their edges. The Republicans who turned "the government isn't

the solution, the government is the problem" into a slogan quickly joined efforts to pump government resources into the economy, into businesses, into people. It helped.

Democrats, long associated with regulations, proved willing to bend and cut regulations to get life moving. Notoriously rigid red tape that screamed, "Can't do it," and "don't," suddenly hung out a welcome sign: "try this," "do that."

Three, prayer. The newspapers have been filled with interesting stories of how people are making the most of quarantine shutdown. After we all got Netflixed out and couldn't stand even the cable news talk show host we agree with, people started baking, woodworking, taking online courses—anything to fill time worthily. *The New York Times* interviewed the world-famous cellist Yo-Yo Ma to find out how he was coping. It was an interesting list that ranged from reading animal stories, swimming, listening to Mr. Rogers, plus studying the many joys of Scotch tape, so he's O.K.

Well, a lot of people around here are coming into our little Church for prayer, quiet, privacy, alone time with God. From early morning to 9 PM, seven days a week, couples, kids, neighbors, strangers, one by one they come in, sit down, go to the altar, light a candle, pray, pray, pray some more.

The loudest lesson of these times is some things we can't control. We can plot and scheme and play the odds. We can pick our leaders, our experts, our "go-to" guys to listen to, and we're still not in control.

Some people call it a "come to Jesus moment." Some call it being forced to our knees or knocked off our high horse. In every life there is a time when our own thoughts are not enough. Our own wisdom, our own projections, are not enough.

Then, the wise and the humble choose to pray. Prayer is religion at its most basic. Strip away doctrine. Strip away clergy, ritual, buildings, Scriptures. What's left is you and God, one-on-one. That's prayer.

Four. We are the hands and feet of Christ, just as Alida said in last week's sermon. Jesus lived, died, resurrected, and ascended to heaven. So physically he's gone from the scene. The Holy Spirit is, by definition, a spirit. That leaves us to do the heavy lifting. Anything that cares for our neighbor, anything that helps those in need, any justice that is accomplished, any doing that needs doing has to be done by us. "We are the hands and feet of Christ." Our Church has been involved in a monumental amount of good. Truth is, all across this nation, millions and millions of people are expressing God's love. Every day. In every way.

Last, it turns out most of us *can* walk and chew gum at the same time. The Covid-19 shutdown, the Black Lives Matter protests, the politics, each could have crippled us; together could have knocked us out. Instead, many Americans have found an inner strength, an inner resolve, an inner faith, and therefore the will to be more Christlike, to be our best, even during the worst.

Frankly, I've been amazed at Americans' ability to turn lemons into lemonade, almost literally. Or at least turn a Bridgeport vodka distillery into a mass-producer of hand sanitizer. From no ventilators, to plenty; from not enough masks to fashion-statement masks, we met the enemy head-on and fast.

I'm amazed at stores and restaurants and businesses that have reconfigured themselves into places of productivity and success. I'm amazed at the patrons and customers and clients who have found new ways to engage. Yes, there are crazies at both ends, probably 10 percent of the population, unhinged, left and right. That's where the noise is, the drama, the ego. That's not where the work gets done.

Five hundred years before Christ, Israel found itself in turmoil and crisis. Death, destruction, and defeat had taken an awful toll. Israel was in ruins. Read the Book of Nehemiah. You'll see all the obstacles they faced. All the opposition. All the naysayers. What did Spiro Agnew call his critics? "The nattering nabobs of negativism." Well, Israel had plenty of those, within and without.

But enough of them got their act together, and so we read in Nehemiah Ch. 4, verse 6, "So we rebuilt the wall, for the people had a mind to work." *The people had a mind to work.* The newer translation puts it, "The people worked with all their heart." *All their heart.*

The best of the last five months has been whenever and whoever "worked with all their heart." The worst of the last five months has been whenever and whoever was halfhearted, or heartless.

To summarize: No, God didn't do this to punish us. Yes, we are all in this together. Yes, we are smarter when we rise above our politics. Yes, we need to pray. Yes, we need to use our hands and feet for Christ. Yes, we need to do it all "with all our heart."

Our final hymn today is "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," No. 5.

*O for a thousand tongues to sing
my great Redeemer's praise,
the glories of my God and king,*

the triumphs of God's grace!

*Jesus, the name that charms our fears,
that bids our sorrows cease;
'tis music in the sinner's ears,
'tis life, and health, and peace.*

*My loving Savior and my God,
assist me to proclaim
to spread through all the earth abroad
the honors of thy name.*

*Glory to God and praise and love
be ever, ever given
by saints below and saints above,
the Church in earth and heaven.*