

Letting Go of Judgment

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Last week, I told a story about when I was in middle school and our church went to a youth conference to listen to a guy named Dawson McAllister. Now, this guy was the left behind series before the left behind series. For him, the most important thing teenagers needed to hear were very explicit details about the rapture, the anti-Christ, the second coming, the mark of the beast, heaven, and, of course, hell. And if you don't know what any of those things are, consider yourself lucky. He literally wanted to scare the hell out of us. And so, I guess, to make his point, he had a list of people who he believed were in hell and at the top of the list were the Beatles. I'm not sure if he knew that at that time, John Lennon was the only one of the Beatles who was dead, but you know, why not?

He then invited us to make our own list and write down the names of 3 people who had died that we thought were in hell. Now this was my second year going to Dawson McAllister. The first year, he had scared me and I participated in whatever he asked us to do. But my parents hated this theology. They talked to me about it and considered not letting me go. But all my friends were going and I wanted to go, so basically they said what is normally the exact opposite of what parents normally tell their kids on church trips – "Make sure you have a good time and don't listen to a word that preacher says."

If you've told your kids that about my sermons, just keep that to yourself.

But seriously, my parents gave me a great gift. They gave me permission to question the preacher. And again seriously, whether you are a kid or not, I hope you all will feel free to question, doubt, or disagree with anything I ever say.

But back to my story. I trusted my parents and I decided that Dawson McAllister could no more determine whether I or anybody else would go to hell than he could walk on water, so I didn't participate. I didn't write down the names of the people I thought were in hell.

But I took it a step farther.

When I got home, with the encouragement of my parents, I wrote Dawson McAllister a letter. I quoted the Bible to him when Jesus says in Matthew, "Judge not or you will be judged." I told him it wasn't Christian for him to think he could decide who was in hell or not.

I got a letter back...

Guess who made the hell list.

Today we continue our Lenten sermon series Letting Go and our theme today is Letting Go of Judgment. Now, I feel like this theme is kind of right in our wheel house as a UCC congregation. I'm guessing that one of the reasons many, if not all of you, go to church here is because you don't want to be a part of a church that has a judgmental theology, a church that likes to point out who the sinners are and who's going to hell. But I think there's another component to judgment that may hit closer to home for us and that is the need to be able to explain suffering,

evil, tragedy, and disappointment. While none of us here are keeping our list of people in hell, I think probably all of us at one point or other have asked the question:

Why is this happening? What did I do to deserve this? What did they do to deserve that?

And thoughts about judgment lie just below the surface of these types of questions. Whether we say it explicitly or implicitly, there is a strong temptation to think that it is all our fault when bad things happen. We humans have a strong need to be able to explain suffering, and I think the reason is because we think if we can explain it, then we can control it.

We can see Jesus responding to that understanding in our gospel reading today. Listen again to these words from Luke 13:

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"

People in the crowd told Jesus about some other people from Galilee – the same area where Jesus was from – that the Roman governor Pilate (the same Pilate who had Jesus crucified) had slaughtered. And in this case, the crowds did not imply that the people who were killed deserved it, but Jesus uses it as an opportunity to teach a lesson. The people who died were no worse sinners than everyone else. Jesus then, without being prompted, decides to tell about another tragedy of a tower that fell and again says, "They were no worse sinners than everyone else." In one case, the suffering is caused by a ruthless ruler and the other by a random tragedy – a tower collapsing, but in both, the suffering was not the fault of the people who suffered.

Friends, I think it is precisely because there is so much evil, so much pain, so much suffering in the world that we want an explanation for it. And to be fair, sometimes there is an explanation, but even in situations where we can point to contributing factors, there's still not one thing that we can point to that we can say it would have certainly been different were it not for....this. We live in a wild world that is filled with uncertainty, disease, chaos, and death. And if there is a sufficient explanation for all of this, I haven't found it and Jesus doesn't offer one.

One of the best books I've read in the last few years is Kate Bowler's book, *Everything Happens for a Reason and other lies I've loved*. Kate is a professor at my alma mater, Duke Divinity school, and everything seemed to be going according to plan for her. She was happily married with a new healthy baby, her first book was published and her career was taking off and then, seemingly out of the blue, she was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. The *Everything Happens* book is more of a reflection on how she deals not only with her cancer but with the explanations that so many people, including herself, tried to offer her to explain it. In her book, she writes:

Most everyone I meet is dying to make me certain. They want me to know, without a doubt, that there is a hidden logic to this seeming chaos. Even when I was still in the hospital, a neighbor came to the door and told my husband that everything happens for a reason. "I'd love to hear it," he replied. "Pardon?" she said, startled. "The reason my wife is dying," he said in that sweet and sour way he has, effectively ending the conversation as the neighbor stammered something and handed him a casserole.

The truth is there is no such thing as a suitable explanation. There is no rational, intellectual defense of God that works in the midst of human suffering. There is no easy answer that allows us to put the blame at the feet of someone or to find a higher purpose. So often, suffering just is and any attempt to explain it is to quickly fall into a judgmental theology.

But Kate also realizes that while suffering just is, so too is goodness, so too is beauty, so too is love. In that same chapter, she writes:

I can't reconcile the way that the world is jolted by events that are wonderful and terrible, the gorgeous and the tragic. Except, I am beginning to believe that these opposites do not cancel each other out. I see a middle-aged woman in the waiting room of the cancer clinic, her arms wrapped around the frail frame of her son. She squeezes him tightly, oblivious to the way he looks down at her sheepishly. He laughs after a minute, a hostage to her impervious love. Joy persists somehow and I soak it in. The horror of cancer has made everything seem like it is painted in bright colors. I think the same thoughts again and again: Life is so beautiful. Life is so hard.

Our gospel reading today reminded us to not look for easy explanations for human suffering and certainly to avoid blaming the person for their own suffering, or for many of us, to avoid blaming ourselves for our suffering. Our Old Testament reading today, comes from Isaiah, and I think it helps us see more the truth of Kate's words – that life is hard, but life is also beautiful. Listen to these words from Isaiah 55:

*Everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
² Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
⁹ For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

The book of Isaiah is actually broken down into at least two, maybe three, parts. The first 39 chapters were written as the people of Jerusalem were about to be conquered by the Babylonians and taken into exile. Those chapters express pain at the plight of the people. Beginning in chapter 40, though, a later writer, one who is writing after the exile had ended and the people had returned home, writes through a lens of hope and redemption. But one of the things I find most compelling is that the imagery of water is used throughout. Early in Isaiah, the

prophet speaks of the coming flood, of the people being washed away. Water is a destructive image and metaphor. But then, just as the tone of Isaiah changes in chapter 40, so too does the use of the metaphor. “Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters,” the prophet calls out. Now, the imagery of water is all about giving life. The same image, water, used to speak of suffering and also used to speak of life and hope.

Water is always the same substance – 2 hydrogen atoms combined with one oxygen atom to form a water molecule. That is true whether water is bringing life or destroying life. It is the same substance...always. About fifteen years ago, I went hiking at Yosemite National Park and our trail began by climbing to the top of 2 water falls. At the top of the second water fall, you can walk right next to the river above the falls and it is beautiful. The view, the sound of the water, the granite cliffs all around, and the 600 foot falls is one of the most inspiring, life-giving sights, I’ve ever encountered.

But here’s the thing -- it’s not safe either. Beside the river is a sign that says, “If you fall in the river, you will be swept over the falls and die.” That’s literally what it says.

The same water.

The same river that can inspire, that makes life feel so beautiful, so worth living, can also take life away.

I kind of feel like that’s how all of life is. Life is filled with beauty and hope and joy. And life is filled with death and sorrow and pain. It’s all a part of life and we do ourselves and each other a disservice by trying to explain either one too easily.

So may we let go of the need to place judgment on both the beauty and the pain of life, to let go of the need to try to explain either. And instead, to focus on how we live through each, too never take for granted that which is beautiful and hopeful and loving, and to resist blaming ourselves or others for that which is hard and difficult and filled with suffering.

And maybe, more than anything, we are invited to remember that regardless of what season of life we may be in, to remember that we do life together. We celebrate together in good times and we uphold each other in hard times – without explanation, without judgment. We are simply invited to be present.

And I think that is ultimately the gift that Jesus offers us. Jesus did not remove pain from us. But he did endure pain with us. He entered into our humanity and experienced the full range of joy and beauty and the full depths of suffering and pain – just like we do. And perhaps, the great gift in letting go of judgment and letting go of the need to explain, is that we just get to journey through this hard, beautiful life together.

I’ll let Kate have the last word as she describes a conversation with one of her mentors:

I had asked him about heaven. He knew what I was asking because he always knows. Will I be connected? Will I miss everything? Will I see my son sprout up and learn the rules of Canadian football? Can I see him graduate and be launched into the world? How many times can I sit beside his bed and watch his eyes squeeze tight as we thank God for toy tractors and the sticks we throw in the stream beside our house. These are the plans I’ve made. These are the hopes

that are being ground into dust. And then I remember what he said next, "Don't skip to the end."

Let us pray:

O God, may we give up this Lent and forever the desire for judgment – not just the theology that sends people to hell but the theology that wants to explain everything, the theology that wants to believe that if we do everything right, good will come to us while implicitly saying that if good does not come, it means everything was not done right. Remind us that you, Jesus, experienced both the beauty and the difficulty of life. Remind us that we will too. Help us to be gentle with each other and ourselves as we navigate our life's journey. Amen.