

Blessed or Lucky?
Sunday, October 15, 2017

Why? Why did the bridge fall when those particular people were on it? Why of the thousands of people at a concert in Las Vegas on a Sunday night in October were these 58 killed? Why in the fires burning in California does one house burn to the ground while its neighbor stands unharmed? Why did the car crash happen just after you drove safely through the intersection? Why? This is the question Thornton Wilder (incidentally a Unitarian) set out to explore in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey: Is there a direction and meaning in the lives beyond the individual's own will?* As the novelist Russell Banks wrote in his forward to a recent edition of the book: "It is perhaps the largest and most profoundly personal philosophical inquiry that we can undertake. It is the question that defines us as human beings."

Why do bad things happen? Why do good things happen? Why do we suffer? Why do we benefit? Is someone in charge? Is there a plan? Human beings have pondered these questions for thousands of years without settling on an answer. When something good happens do you attribute it to an outside force which chose you? Or is it just the luck of the draw? Does everything happen for a reason? Or do events come to us at random?

Though I began thinking about these questions over the summer, this week has turned out to be a good time to ponder them. How do we understand the damage done by the wildfires in California? When one house is burned and the neighboring house untouched – is there a reason? Can one say that she's been blessed when your neighbor has lost everything? Did she deserve her untouched home? Did the neighbor deserve the charred ruins of his?

These kinds of questions often trouble people who understand the good things that come to them as blessings from God. The Christian writer Rachel Held Evans is one of those people. She wrote:

It's sort of an unspoken rule that good Christians refrain from using the word "luck" when describing happy circumstances. By far the more spiritual word is "blessed," for it connotes divine intervention by God as opposed to mere chance.

So when you reflect on ten years of happy marriage, you are supposed to say that you are "blessed" to have a loving and supportive spouse. When you eat a particularly delicious homemade meal, you are supposed to say that you are "blessed" to have more than enough food to eat, especially when so many around the world suffer from hunger. When your church successfully raises enough money to build a new facility, you are supposed to say that God "blessed" the congregation with a fruitful capital campaign. When you arrive at the Krispy Kreme just in time

to eat the last hot doughnut, you exclaim, “Aren’t I luck...I mean, blessed...to have arrived just in time!”

Although I know these rules, and generally try to play by them, the word “blessed” has always bothered me a little. For some reason, I feel like calling myself “blessed” sends the message that I have somehow earned God’s special favor, that God is rewarding me for good behavior, and that the millions of people who suffer from war, famine, poverty, and sickness because they weren’t lucky (or blessed or fortunate) enough to be born in the wealthiest nation in the world are simply not as loved by God.

In other words, if God has divinely intervened within human affairs in order to “bless” Alabama running back Mark Ingram with a particularly good game on Saturday, what does that say about the family of refugees in Uganda who beg God for just enough food to get through the day...but to no avail? Why would God “bless” me with a wonderful husband, a book deal, and a 1500-square-foot house, while allowing little girls to be sold into sex slavery and little boys forced into armies? Am I more worthy of God’s special attention? Have I sinned less than my brothers and sisters around the world?

These important theological questions came to the fore for her on a trip to India where she volunteered in programs supporting women, children, and AIDS patients. She wrote: *they prayed for basic things—food, shelter, health, peace—and they did not always receive. Yet I saw in their eyes the kind of joy and spiritual connectedness that most Christians I know long for. They spoke of Jesus like one speaks of an intimate friend or lover,... Perhaps wealth and privilege and hot Krispy Kreme doughnuts should not immediately be taken as signs of God’s blessings after all...And yet I still use the word to describe everything from my career to my furniture. Why? Because it sounds more spiritual than “luck.”*

And I was left wondering if she would give up her house and her book deal, the blessings of her life, for the blessings of the spiritual connectedness she saw in India. Would the people in India be willing to trade their blessings for some of Evans’ security, comfort, and peace? Is there a reason beyond that of economics and politics that gave Evans a book deal and a house while these women and children received hardship and illness?

The problem with seeing material goods and events as a blessing from God lies, as Evans sees, with the converse: If your house burns down or you lose your job or are diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, does that mean that God has cursed you or at the very least not deemed you worthy of keeping safe? Not all people who believe blessings come from God are as tender-hearted as Rachel Held

Evans when it comes to these questions. Many carry their theology to its logical conclusion and say, “yes – some are blessed, and some are cursed.” We see this today in the Prosperity Gospel which I see as a perversion of Christianity. Paula White, Donald Trump’s minister, for instance, believes in generational blessings and curses – so that if your life is not filled with the blessings of prosperity, it may be that you have done something wrong yourself to bring on God’s disfavor, or it may be that one of your ancestors brought on the curse and there’s nothing you can do about it. This understanding of blessing and curse provides a theological basis for not helping people who struggle with poverty, illness, or oppression – it’s all part of God’s plan and there’s nothing we can or need to do to help them. God has willed my good fortune and their misfortune.

I realized as I was working on this sermon that one reason I find this understanding so dangerous and harmful comes from a deep story in my own family. On the evening of January 5, 1960, before I was born, my mother’s mother Pearl Merrill got on an airplane in New York to fly down to Florida to surprise her mother the next day on her birthday. Cracks in the cockpit windshield were discovered and passengers were asked to disembark. The windshield couldn’t be replaced quickly and no equally large plane was available, so after some time two smaller airplanes were made ready to accommodate the passengers from the flight. 76 passengers boarded the first plane and 29 the second. My grandmother was a dawdler like I am, so she boarded the second flight. The first plane landed safely in Miami the next morning. The second flight exploded in the early morning hours of January 6 over Bolivia, North Carolina. All 29 passengers and the 5 crew members were killed. It was later determined that one of the passengers had brought dynamite onto the plane, possibly trying to commit suicide to leave insurance money for his family.

Imagine how the 79 passengers on the first plane felt when they heard the news and realized their narrow escape. Might some have said they’d been blessed? Does that mean that the passengers and crew members of the second plane and their families left to grieve them had been cursed? Does it mean that we shouldn’t bother with screening procedures to prevent people from bringing dynamite and weapons on planes since it’s all part of God’s plan?

I don’t believe in a God that chooses some people to save and others to be harmed. I don’t believe in a God who controls our lives and runs the universe. I don’t believe in a God who blesses and curses. The God I believe in, though I don’t always use that word, is the force of Love with a capital “L” – not romantic love, but the self-less force which wills the best for all elements of life, from the corals in the ocean to the warblers of the skies and all that’s in-between. I picture this God not as a puppet-master pulling our strings but like a river flowing to the ocean. When

we allow ourselves to be carried by the river, we are in harmony with the forces of life and justice. This doesn't mean that nothing bad can happen to us, but that even when it does, that force works through us to help good come from them. Perhaps the good that came from the death of the woman who would have been my grandmother is that all her grandchildren, none of whom ever met her, have chosen to engage in different ways in the work of helping those who suffer – as a social worker, a police officer, a political aide, and clergy. But I certainly don't believe that God set her death in motion so that her then non-existent grandchildren would make these choices.

What do you believe about the workings of the universe? When good things come to you, do you understand them as luck or blessings? How have your life experiences shaped your understanding? Though you might not have used the word, these are theological questions, and our Unitarian Universalist tradition tells us each of us must answer them for ourselves. Our answers and understandings may change over time, but it is important to address the questions – our answers determine not just how we live our own lives but how we work or don't work for the good of others. Every year here at First Parish we explore one of the seven principles of our Unitarian Universalist Association. This year our focus is the 4th principle – “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” We can explore it in many ways – through our worship, through the study of the New Testament which begins tomorrow, through our discussions on issues of power and privilege. If, in addition, you would be interested in deepening your own free and responsible search for truth and meaning through exploring the stories of your own life, through a class in Spiritual Autobiography, please let me know. This seems like the perfect year to offer that class which I've led in other churches, but not yet in Scituate. Especially at this time when a theological understanding of blessing and curse is influencing our country's leaders, our world needs us to understand our own theology so that we may speak it and live it. It needs us to hear us proclaim that none of us is blessed, none of us is cursed, and the welfare of one is the welfare of all. People need our good news of the power and call of Love.

At the end of *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, Brother Juniper has amassed thousands of pages of notes on the five people who died, but nothing that allows him to discern why those five people in particular were on the bridge when it fell. But the final words of the book go to an Abbess who lost two people she loved when the bridge fell. Thinking of them and of the other three, she muses, “[S]oon ... all memories of those five will have left Earth,.... But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them.”

Love – the blessing each of us is born with. Love – the blessing each of us may leave behind.

- Pamela M. Barz

Readings

Lots of sorrow and a little joy.
Lots of joy and only a bit
Of sorrow.
Who can know
The formula beforehand?

We don't get to watch
While it's mixed. No one tells us
What's in it.
We lift it
To our lips - azure elixir
That burns our throats to crystal.

~ Gregory Orr, from *How Beautiful the Beloved*)

From *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* by Thornton Wilder

On Friday noon, July the twentieth, 1714, the finest bridge in all Peru broke and precipitated five travelers into the gulf below. This bridge was on the high-road, between Lima and Cuzco and hundreds of persons passed over it every day. It had been woven of osier by the Incas more than a century before and visitors to the city were always led out to see it. It was a mere ladder of thin slats swung out over the gorge, with handrails of dried vine. Horses and coaches and chairs had to go down hundreds of feet below and pass over the narrow torrent on rafts, but no one, not even the Viceroy, not even the Archbishop of Lima, had descended with the baggage rather than cross by the famous bridge of San Luis Rey. St. Louis of France himself protected it, by his name and by the little mud church on the further side. The bridge seemed to be among the things that last forever; it was unthinkable that it should break. The moment a Peruvian heard of the accident he signed himself and made a mental calculation as to how recently he had crossed by it and how soon he had intended crossing by it again. People wandered about in a trance-like state, muttering; they had the hallucination of seeing themselves falling into a gulf.

Everyone was very deeply impressed, but only one person did anything about it, and that was Brother Juniper. By a series of coincidences so extraordinary that one almost suspects the presence of some Intention, this little red-haired Franciscan

from Northern Italy happened to be in Peru converting the Indians and happened to witness the accident.

It was a very hot noon, that fatal noon, and coming around the shoulder of a hill Brother Juniper stopped to wipe his forehead and to gaze upon the screen of snowy peaks in the distance, then into the gorge below him filled with the dark plumage of green trees and green birds and traversed by its ladder of osier. ... Then his glance fell upon the bridge, and at that moment a twanging noise filled the air, as when the string of some musical instrument snaps in a disused room, and he saw the bridge divide and fling five gesticulating ants into the valley below.

Anyone else would have said to himself with secret joy: "Within ten minutes myself ...!" But it was another thought that visited Brother Juniper: "Why did this happen to those five?" If there were any plan in the universe at all, if there were any pattern in a human life, surely it could be discovered mysteriously latent in those lives so suddenly cut off. Either we live by accident and die by accident, or we live by plan and die by plan. And on that instant Brother Juniper made the resolve to inquire into the secret lives of those five persons, that moment falling through the air, and to surprise the reason of their taking off.