

## From “WHY?” to “WHAT NOW?” *John 9.1-34*

The unthinkable, unspeakable madness that reigned on the campus of Virginia Tech University for a few hours last Monday morning lingers, abrasively etched into our troubled psyches. It raises all kinds of troubling questions that disturb us during our waking hours and haunt us in our dreams.

- Are our in-schooled children safe? (I thought about our sons, one of whom is a senior at Rice University in Houston, Texas, while the other is a public school teacher.)
- Is our community safe? (Obviously, the menace of violent behavior that seems to have beset us of late encompasses more than just the crazed malevolence of some religious and political fanatics from the Middle East!)
- Why aren't law enforcement officials, school administrators, mental health professionals, government agencies, and others dedicated to protecting us from madmen (few women do these sorts of things) not able to intervene before it is too late?
- What role do gun ownership and our deference to the Second Amendment play—*or not play*—in outrages such as this? Should guns be banned, or would it be better if everyone came to class—or work—packing a weapon?
- How can a human being created in the image of God contemplate, much less plan and execute such an evil act?
- Is evil more powerful than good in our world?
- How could God let such a horrific tragedy take place?

I learned about the summary execution of thirty-two innocents at Virginia Tech at the end of class on Monday afternoon. The title of the course I am teaching at Lancaster

Theological Seminary is “Jesus and the Gospels.” I had just finished lecturing on the Gospel of John and had, in fact, talked about the very passage from John that serves as our primary Scripture text this morning. I thought of that passage as the aforementioned questions swirled around in my mind over the next few days. So *how does* a Christian account for the existence of unthinkable, unspeakable evil—what one of my theology professors used to call “hell on wheels”?

(Let me say, parenthetically, that in using the term “evil” in this sermonic reflection I am deliberately *not* differentiating between the deliberate perpetration of malice by some sentient being and what we commonly speak of as “natural disasters.” As we shall note, in trying to account for the origins of tragic events, people in the biblical world did not make fine distinctions between calamities caused by living personalities and those caused by Mother Nature. Ultimately, *someone* was always thought to be responsible for human misery.)

John 9 begins with Jesus and his disciples walking down some dusty road in the Holy Land. They pass a man born blind—he was categorized by his neighbors as a “sinner”—and the disciples ask Jesus how this poor beggar might have come to suffer his sightless fate:

“Is he blind as a punishment for his own sins, or is his blindness due to God’s judgment of the sins of his parents?”

We who are parents instinctively recoil from the second possibility, but let us not be too hasty to scold the disciples for considering such a thing. One can, after all, find passages in the Sacred Scriptures of Jesus’ day expressly declaring that the sins of the parents will be visited upon their children and children’s children for many generations. For example, Numbers 14.18 warns that “the LORD [will visit] the iniquity of the parents upon the[ir]

children to the third and the fourth generation” (NRSV here and elsewhere). Never mind that later in the same Sacred Text we find passages expressing an opposite view:

In those days they shall no longer say: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. But all shall die for their own sins; the teeth of everyone who eats sour grapes shall be set on edge. (Jeremiah 31.29f; see also Ezekiel 18.2)

Folks in Jesus' day believed that sometimes bad things like leprosy or blindness or paralysis happened to a person *as divine judgment* for his/her wicked family heritage. In other words, they assumed that some kind of organic nexus of sin and guilt potentially existed within every family system. Now isn't there some truth to this? When we peer into the family history of people who commit outrageous behavior, do we not oftentimes we find evidence of irresponsible and immoral patterns of conduct up and down the family tree? Spousal abusers beget spousal abusers; alcoholics beget alcoholics; racists beget racists; con artists beget con artists; and so on. This isn't inevitably the case, fortunately; but the phenomenon does occur often enough for us to anticipate such a pattern in every situation. Which of us did not ponder the possibility early last week that Seung-Hui Cho's family might have failed him in some extraordinary way—so that in some measure they share his guilt? *So we try to blame the parents.*

*Or we try to blame the victim*—that was the disciples' other explanation for the beggar-man's blindness. In this case, I trust that we can all agree that it would be outrageous to blame those thirty-two innocent students and professors for what befell them so tragically last Monday morning. But I warn you that there are those in our midst who see things otherwise. When revered men of the cloth smugly declare on TV that Hurricane Katrina's destruction of New Orleans was God's punishment upon that urban den of iniquity, or that AIDs is divine retribution against gays, or that 9/11 expressed

God’s righteous indignation towards a materially and sexually self-indulgent America, do we not hear in such preacherly judgments a distant replay of the world view of the misguided disciples, who earnestly believed that bad things happen only to bad people?

But we have progressed beyond blaming innocent victims, or so we think. Instead, *we try to blame the guilty perpetrator himself*. In the case of Seung-Hui Cho, there is no question that he acted deliberately and with malice aforethought—we have videos to prove it! But it also seems pretty clear that he was mentally deranged—at least that is how the psychological pundits on TV interpret his videotaped pre-death rantings and ravings. We know better today than to blame a man for blindness due to natural causes, but are we willing to recognize that mental illness is also oftentimes rooted in “natural” causes—deleterious genes, toxic biochemistry in the brain, *in utero* traumas, etc.? And what about the madman (or –woman) who is driven into criminal madness by some kind of malignant family or community environment? Of course all perpetrators of evil must be held accountable—and we must be protected from them. But what constitutes humane accountability for someone like Seung-Hui Cho? Do we absolve ourselves of further responsibility if we simply blame and punish the mass murderer?

*Or perhaps we try to blame the demons*—be they spiritual or psychological. While at the gym on Wednesday I watched a couple of news broadcasts simultaneously as two experts on evil offered strikingly different theories about the cause of Seung-Hui Cho’s moral madness. Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, said on CNN that the young man’s behavior was due to satanic possession: a demon had inspired him to do evil. On FOX News, Dr. Drew (people of my generation and older may not know who Dr. Drew Pinsky is, but let’s just say he is to my sons’ generation what Dr. Timothy

Johnson or Dr. Sanjay Gupta are to us older folks)—anyway, Dr. Drew explained Mr. Cho’s behavior in terms of psychological pathology, using such terms as “blank affect,” “psychotic paranoia,” “personality disorder,” and “schizophrenia.” It is so chilling to imagine a human being contemplating such unthinkable, unspeakable evil that some of us come to believe it must be the work of some kind of irrational, unnatural, alien force. I have grave doubts about demon possession theories, and I suspect that when people think they have exorcised demons, what they have actually done is unknowingly manipulate psychological forces within the subconscious mind. But when I shared this point of view with my budding psychologist son, he the ever cautious practitioner of empirical science reminded me that while this might be true, it *could* be the case that the secular therapist who uses the tools of psychology to heal a troubled mind might actually be exorcising a demon without knowing it. I guess we have to leave that question unanswered...

But you know something, even *if* we knew everything there is to know about demons and psychological pathologies, even *if* we knew whether it was the parents’ fault or the victim’s fault or the perpetrator’s fault, none of these explanations would resolve the deeper existential problem that evil raises, would it? For the *real* problem with unthinkable, unspeakable evil is that it calls into question the goodness and power of God. And that is what makes this tragedy at Virginia Tech so troubling.

Where was God in all of this? Did God *cause* it to happen, as punishment for something? But how could a **good** God punish thirty-two innocent students? What did they do to merit such punishment? Is God a sociopath? Clearly this is not a satisfactory explanation! But then we ask, why did God *allow* such evil to take place? Does God lack the **power** to arrest evil? Why does God allow thirty-two, sixty-four, and sometimes

several hundred innocent Iraqis *each day* to die in the crossfire of civil war? Has the Creator of the universe become impotent? This too is a most unsatisfactory solution.

Everything has a purpose, Christians say. God must be up to something, acting according to a divine plan or reacting to choices made by moral and immoral beings. As I pointed out earlier, every evil circumstance in the Bible is attributed to some rational and moral personality—whether it be a human sinner, a demonic creature, or God (as Judge and Executioner). That’s because in the ancient world no one seems to have been able to imagine the possibility that sometimes suffering happens to us for no *overarching moral* or *rational* purpose at all. The ancients believed deeply in fate and in determinism, that some rational mind always influences every historic event. On the other hand, Quantum physicists tell us that at the most microscopic level of the universe this isn’t necessarily so, that subatomic particles sometimes behave without any discernible or predictable reason or cause. Can one make an analogy from the world of matter to the world of the spirit? Is it possible that we live in a world that is more truly free than our ancestors ever imagined? And does this frighten you? Even the great Albert Einstein had problems with so much radical freedom. He once famously said, “God doesn’t play dice with the universe.” But several generations of careful scientific analysis since Einstein made that comment have proven him wrong—imagine that, Einstein was *wrong!*

To suggest that sometimes bad things happen to good people for no apparent overarching moral or rational purpose does not in and of itself get God off the hook for allowing evil to fall upon the innocent. It remains a problem of *theodicy* that Job could not solve, that the Bible does not solve, and that we cannot solve. For some reason, God has created a world in which radical freedom flourishes, allowing for incredible

achievements of human inspiration and extraordinary acts of sacrificial love, but also opening the door for unthinkable, unspeakable acts of utter moral depravity and natural disasters of cataclysmic proportions. As the bumper sticker says, “Stuff Happens” (actually, there is usually a different word than “stuff” printed on the sticker, but it wouldn’t really be appropriate for me to use *that word* in this sacred context!). “Stuff happens!” ... “And that’s life.”

But if with our finite minds we finally come to a quote from a profane bumper sticker, is that the last word we can say about evil in our life-world?

**No!**

Not according to Jesus. Look again at John 9.3-5:

Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.

While the disciples try to focus on what might have *caused* the man’s blindness, Jesus turns the focal point to WHAT he (and they) might NOW do to ameliorate the man’s painful condition. I am persuaded that the phrase, he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him is a *result* clause, not a *purpose* clause. A better way to translate the Greek word (**i [na]**) that our Bibles render as “so that” is to say “with the result that”—“he was born blind with the result that God's works might be revealed in him.”

Why do I believe this? Look back at verse 2:

His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, [with the result] that he was born blind?"

This phrase, “with the result that,” is my English rendering of the same word, **i [na]**, that is found in verse 3. Clearly in verse 2 the fact that the man was born blind is alleged to

be a result of someone’s sin. (The disciples are not presuming that the man or his parents sinned in order that or for the purpose that he might be born blind!)

Interestingly, Jesus does not answer his disciples’ question, “WHY did God *cause* this, or at least *allow* this to happen?” Instead, Jesus answers another question, “WHAT NOW must we do to make this person’s life better?” In Jesus’ case, he has the power to cure the man of his blindness. In our case, we employ the insights of medical science and other fields of knowledge to effect whatever physical, emotional, social and spiritual healing we are able to achieve.

We cannot answer the “WHY did this happen?” question. But we *can* answer the “WHAT NOW do we do?” question.

- ⇒ And so in God’s name we collect large sums of money to help the victims of that India Ocean tsunami that took place a couple of years ago.
- ⇒ And in Christ’s call to love our neighbor we go to the Gulf coast to rebuild homes after Katrina.
- ⇒ And through the Spirit’s inspiration we pray for the grieving families at Virginia Tech, we send them cards of sympathy, we support those who provide direct comfort, and we even pledge ourselves to pay *additional taxes* (if necessary) to establish better government-sponsored safeguards against such unthinkable, unspeakable events in the future.

So WHAT NOW might we do?

- ✓ We might give our loved ones an extra hug.
- ✓ We might become more vigilant in recognizing the signs of mental illness.
- ✓ We might create communities of extravagant love in order to try to meet the emotional and spiritual needs of victims *and* repentant perpetrators of evil.
- ✓ We might focus on redemption and restitution more than revenge and retribution.

- ✓ And *in radical freedom* we might do everything in our power to make irrational, unpredictable, inscrutable tragedies such as happened last Monday less likely to occur.

And note: we ask this “WHAT NOW?” question **in hope**. We ask the “WHAT NOW?” question **in hope** not because we close our eyes to the depth of evil and suffering in our world, and not because we merely *wish* that things might be better. Rather,

- † We ask “WHAT NOW?” **in hope** because we believe in resurrection.
- † We ask “WHAT NOW?” **in hope** because we believe that Jesus’ life did not end on the cross.
- † We ask “WHAT NOW?” **in hope** because we believe that human life has eternal value and an eternal timetable.
- † We ask “WHAT NOW?” **in hope** because we believe that Almighty God, oftentimes mysterious and inscrutable, loves the world passionately and seeks within the parameters of freedom that God has ordained nevertheless to improve our human condition.
- † We ask “WHAT NOW?” **in hope** because we believe that death does not have the final say in life—for these thirty-*three* victims, for every human sufferer, for ourselves and for our loved ones.
- † We ask “WHAT NOW?” **in hope** because we really believe it when the

Apostle Paul writes:

Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" ...  
But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord  
Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:55, 57)

And again:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.  
(Romans 8:38-39)