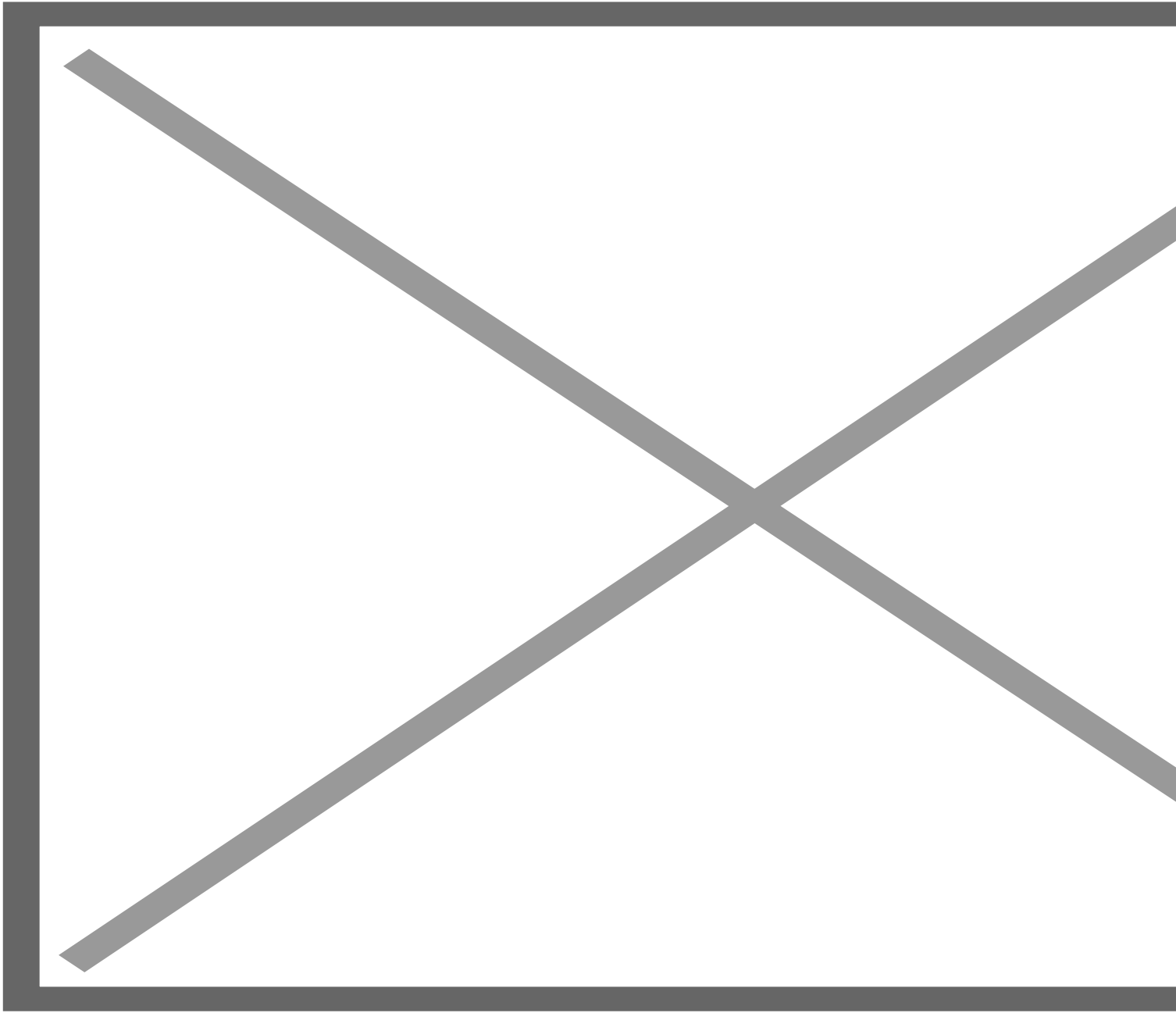


Collective punishment

The scriptural concept of collective blessing challenges the pervasive logic that seems to be holding this country hostage.

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A look at the news headlines reveals that our present political moment is dominated by one concept in particular—collective punishment. Scripture is not unanimous in its condemnation of the idea of collective punishment, but it also contains something that we as a society ought to consider in this time of crisis—the idea of collective blessing.

Scripture does not shy away from the idea of collective punishment. We find it throughout the long story of God’s relationship with Israel. Take, for instance, God’s collective punishment of an entire generation of Israelites by making them wander in the wilderness. Throughout scripture, we find entire nations paying the price for their leaders’ actions, with the Egyptians giving an important touchstone. The plagues were not limited to Pharaoh’s family, but instead were visited upon the entire Egyptian population, directly targeting children who could not have played an active role in the enslavement of the Israelites.

The collective punishment that we see in scripture could have plenty of sources, but one of the most important ways of understanding it is the way that ancient Israelites understood divine history and God’s actions in it. In scripture’s telling, God has nearly unrestricted power and utilizes it to punish entire groups of people without regard for whether they participated in wrongful acts or not, but this is not a senseless endeavour. God is guiding the outcomes of history through divine acts that sometimes include collective punishment.

Jesus’ ministry is also a part of that divine history, with God coming into the world through a person. Jesus tends to push back on ideas of collective punishment, and we get our first glimpse of this in John 9. In this passage, the disciples immediately make several assumptions about divine punishment and disability, asking whether a blind man or his parents sinned. They attempt to find someone to blame, but Jesus’ answer is not about blame. He says that the man’s condition was so that God’s glory might be made manifest in his life, not as a punishment. Jesus was unafraid to counter the logic of his day that saw a direct connection between the actions of others and disability as a punishment, instead showing that the personal and the divine history are linked in complex ways.

Even when it comes to the place where you would most likely encounter collective punishment—the final judgment—scripture’s imagination sees the event as an individual encounter. We must all give an account of our actions in this life, and we will be judged for our actions. But those actions were taken by individuals, and it is individuals who must account for them. In a time that saw sin as something that could be held collectively, such an idea was fresh, perhaps even liberating.

It’s important here not to create a dichotomy between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament—both are tellings of divine history, and both feature elements of collective punishment *and* blessing. Jesus regularly tells parables that feature collective punishment, which certainly give me pause when preaching, and when God chooses Abraham and his descendants, God makes it clear that through this action, “all nations on earth will be blessed” (Genesis 22:18).

Yet we wake up every day in the US in the shadow of collective punishment. In the wake of an attack on a national guardsperson in Washington DC, President Donald Trump announced that he was [permanently pausing](#) all visas for Afghan nationals and indeed all “third-world countries,” in a further restriction of an onerous immigration process. In a similar move, the president has decided to target Somali residents of Minnesota, accusing them of defrauding government programs, just as he targeted the Haitian community in Springfield, Ohio, calling the community “[garbage](#).” This has led to many Somali-Americans, even naturalized citizens, [fearing](#) that they are not protected from the collective punishment the president would visit upon them. In both of these cases, there is an attempt to target already vulnerable groups to instill terror and restrict the vision of what our country could be or become.

It's not an accident that both of these groups, Afghans and Somalis, are predominantly Muslim populations. In a country where White Christian nationalism is surging, Muslims are increasingly under attack from a president who automatically views them as other and un-American. According to the [latest polling](#), Islamophobia is up across the board, with the biggest gains in Christian communities.

To my mind, the rise in Islamophobia is a spiritual emergency that ought to be countered within our communities. We can use scripture's rich resource of collective blessing to enrich our theological imagination and challenge the pervasive logic of collective punishment that seems to be holding this country hostage.

As we increasingly realize that our country is run by a president who imagines himself to have ultimate power and authority to enact his policies, no matter what congress or the courts say, Christians must draw upon the scriptures that not only seem to critique the idea of collective punishment, but see the coming of Jesus as a collective blessing for all of humanity.

While Christian theology has spent much time articulating the idea that Jesus came to save sinners, the original vision of what Jesus did by coming into the world was much more capacious than that: Jesus came to redeem all of creation. Paul writes of this beautifully in Romans 8:19-21:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its enslavement to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

This beautiful vision imagines Jesus as a collective blessing, not just for all peoples but for all of creation. In Jesus, Paul writes that "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven" (Colossians 1:19). This cosmic vision ends with a vision of a new heaven and a new earth in Revelation 21:4, the ultimate culmination of God's redemptive work and a blessing for all.

This central narrative serves as a counterweight to the collective punishment we see in scripture, revealing a God that provides a collective blessing to the entire universe. If we lose sight of this fundamental fact, then we miss the grandness of the scale that redemption offers us. What's worse, we limit our theological and social imaginations so that we can only imagine power and punishment as going together. But Paul's vision of God's power blessing all creation both critiques our limited imagination and points us toward inclusive ways to build a pluralistic democracy.

That leads us to a broader understanding of what our politics should be oriented toward. Christians have to fight for the collective blessing of all of society, not only people who look like us or believe as we do. God wants to bless everyone, and to borrow another image from Paul, we are the body that is supposed to be in the world, giving that blessing. In a country where Christians are the hegemonic religious power, we have a responsibility to use our tradition as a blessing for all.

I take great heart that the doctrine of collective blessing is being practiced right now in Minnesota, where the faith community has [rallied](#) to defend Somalis from the odious policies of vengeance. When we stand up for our neighbors, we are practicing the very best of our tradition in ways that can make a real impact on the world, and we are living into God's vision of collective blessing. We will need many more such efforts in the time to come, and the faith community has a unique resource to draw on in its work to create flourishing communities for everyone.

The idea of collective blessing in scripture is a direct critique of the way power is being wielded to punish in our country. Collective punishment in politics has become normalized, but it does not have to be so. We can use our

rich tradition to find new inroads to collective blessing. That is not only a collateral purpose of our tradition, but its beating heart. As recipients of what scripture deems to be the greatest act of love in the universe, we have to take that love into the world. And, as Cornel West puts it, “justice is what love looks like in public.”