

Seeing God's works beyond reward and punishment (John 9:1-41)

We can't reconcile the senseless mercy of Jesus with an insistence that life is fair.

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In his reimagining of the story of Adam and Eve, *How Good Do We Have to Be? A New Understanding of Guilt and Forgiveness*, Rabbi Harold Kushner observes the Euro-American obsession with a universe in which every action earns divine reward or punishment. This kind of thinking sees personal responsibility as the ordering principle of the universe, to the extent that we'll assume guilt rather than concede that most things simply lie beyond our control. The book of Job and the laments in the Psalms call out this misperception, not to mention our own observations of how life actually works. Yet many of us still cling to it, even though it casts humans as self-determinative and God as a mechanistic reactor.

In today's gospel lesson, everyone except Jesus appears to suffer from a similar preoccupation with tit for tat. The disciples ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" So entrenched is this idea of misfortune targeting the wicked and good fortune falling to the good, they willingly entertain the possibility that either (a) the man was born blind as a preemptive punishment for sins he had yet to commit or (b) he'd somehow sinned in utero.

"How did this happen?" the Pharisees in this passage repeatedly ask. It's not that they're curious about Jesus' technique. They want to know how someone who clearly brought misfortune upon himself regained his sight. They also want to know how someone like Jesus who clearly lives beyond the pale could possibly perform a miracle.

The bystanders' two questions neatly sum up the cognitive dissonance at play here. "Isn't this the man who used to sit and beg?" (In which case, what did he ever do to regain his sight?) And, "Could an ordinary sinner do such miraculous signs?" (In which case, is there more to this Jesus character than we thought?)

Tit for tat, despite its prevalence in the Western Christian imagination, is simply too small a worldview to contain the gospel of Jesus Christ. If good fortune is just the wages of good behavior and if bad behavior requires punishment, there's no room for grace. I see no way to reconcile a confession of faith in the senseless mercy of Jesus with the insistence that life is fair and everyone, eventually, will get what's coming to them.

Jesus doesn't ask to see the blind man's moral credentials before healing him, and he only asks one question himself in this story full of questions: "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

If our answer to that question is yes, we need to jettison the God-limiting and self-aggrandizing worldview and start really looking—as Jesus’ detractors can’t in this episode and as the healed man begins to—for God’s works revealed beyond the meager confines of tit for tat.