Sunday, January 23, 1972
CAUSE AND EFFECT
John 9:1-7

Introduction

A person has been born blind and the disciples of Jesus ask: “Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” What was the cause of the blindness? The disciples assumed automatically that the man born blind, sitting in the sunshine at his house door, was blind because of someone having done something wrong, because of one specific cause, his parent’s or his own. All they asked was, which was it, theirs or his?

Since Jesus’ time and before, this same question has been asked in a thousand ways. A person who has been healthy all his life, suddenly becomes ill, and he asks — "What caused my illness? What did I do wrong? For what am I being punished?”

A retarded child is born, and the parents ask: “What did we do to deserve this? Why did it happen to us?”

A marriage falls apart and the partners ask in surprise and anguish: “What did we do wrong? What is the one cause of our marriage failure?“

A man becomes an alcoholic and his family asks: “What is the cause? Is it because his wife nags, or did his wife nag because he drank? Or is it because he has no will power? Or is it because he lost his job? What is the one direct cause of his alcoholism? Where did he go wrong?”

A child gets out of hand, becomes unmanageable and disobedient, or breaks the law and gets into trouble, and the parents ask: “Where did we fail? What one flaw caused this to happen?”

Or a child becomes what is popularly known as a juvenile delinquent and the question is asked by sociologists and psychologists, parents, and educators: “What caused this delinquency?” And sometimes simple, easy answers are given such as — "It’s that crowd he’s been hanging around with!” Or “There are no juvenile delinquents, only delinquent parents.” Yet such answers are usually too simple. We are trying to identify one specific cause — "who sinned: this man or his parents?”

These examples of “cause and effect” could be multiplied many times. They trouble all of us. And they are all various forms of the same question which the disciples asked Jesus in our scripture lesson — "who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?” In other words, what is the simple cause, the single explanation for the effect? And by the way in which the disciples asked the question, they implied that there was one simple answer, one simple cause that could easily explain the effect.

Other forms of the same question can be found on a broader scale and again simple answers are often sought. What is the one single cause for the inflation in our economy? We’ve all heard various theories, and yet what economists once thought were the orthodox answers don’t seem to work.

If only we could explain cause and effect that easily! How seemingly simple it would've been for Jesus to answer the disciples — "That man's parents sinned, therefore he was born blind."

In the same way, it would be simple, but really not very helpful or truthful to say to the parents of a retarded child — "God is punishing you. Your sin caused this child to be born this way."

OR again, it would not be very helpful or truthful to say to the persons whose marriage is falling apart, trying to identify one single cause such as, "It's all because you do not fix a good hot breakfast for your husband each morning!"

Or if we could say to the parent whose child is becoming unmanageable or sullen, "It all goes back to the time when you punished your child unjustly!" Or if we could say to the alcoholic's family — It's because of your nagging."

But these answers are too simple. It's not just a matter of cause and effect. Why do other persons who are nagged even more, not become alcoholics? Who do other children who are mistreated and mis-managed by their parents, not always become sullen and unmanageable, but sometimes even turn out better than ours? Why do some marriages where a hot breakfast is never served never fall apart?

We're all familiar with the commercials where a person is rejected and wonders why she is so unpopular and she asks in desperation, "what's wrong with me?" And then the voice of another person comes in and says, "what's wrong? It could be your breath!" Then, she and we are told that if we use a certain product our whole lives will change. If only it were that simple — cause and effect!

But life in God's world, the way the world seems to be put together and operates, the things that happen to us or don't happen to us, are not always a simple matter of cause and effect. To be sure, sometimes it is possible to pin-point in some cases, one major cause, but usually not, and even then, we can put the wrong cause with the wrong effect.

Perhaps you've heard about the professor who illustrated the false logic of much of our cause and effect thinking. In his classroom he held a frog in his hand and he com-manded it to jump. It leaped into his other hand. Next, he removed the frog's legs. This time when he shouted, "jump," the frog didn't move. And so, he concluded--you will note that when you remove the legs of a frog, he grows quite deaf." A logical deduction. Sometimes our logic of cause and effect is almost as bad. We make equal mistakes in trying too simply and easily to match one cause with one effect.

Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind? This question has a long history behind it. One of the themes of the book of Job in the Old Testament deals with this issue. The friends of Job try to identify one sin he has committed which can be assigned the cause of all his trouble.

The question touches all of life. What caused this or that to happen? Why did it happen to him? Or to me? And many times, like the disciples, in our asking the question, we already assume that we just about know the answer.

Who sinned, this man or his parents? The disciples al-ready assumed it was someone's sin, the only doubt that remained was, whose? They, like us, did not allow for very many possibilities. They implied a single cause and effect relationship.

Sometimes we ask these questions of cause in a mood of despair: “Where did we go wrong? Where did we fail? What could we have done differently? These are honest questions, and we hope to avoid making similar mistakes in the future. Yet often we assume that we have complete control and that if we had done one thing differently, the whole situation would’ve changed, and such is not necessarily the case.

Trying to pin-point one single cause can also be a method for evading some of the responsibility. If we say — that boy is bad because of the company he keeps, then it’s his fault and the company’s fault. Or we can say, “How can I help? The man was born blind because his parents sinned.”

Perhaps another reason we have often looked at the matter of cause and effect so simply is that not too many years ago some of the sciences seemed to imply that matters could be easily explained with simple cause and effect. John Dalton, a great physicist of the past theorized that all atoms are made of hydrogen atoms. He liked the idea of the atom as the building block, the key to existence. People always seem to want to embrace such monological explanations. This is part of the attractiveness of astrology and the signs of the Zodiac. Everything can be explained according to what sign a person was born under.

But the universe in which we live is much more mysterious than we ever imagined. Buckminster Fuller likes to say that science begins with the awareness of the absolute mystery of the universe.

In every realm, the more we know the more the mystery grows. Our ancient forefathers thought they lived upon a flat and stationary earth, and they were content with simple explanations, while we are on a planet flying eighteen and a half miles per second, with the nearest star 25 trillion miles away. There has been an increase of knowledge, but also an increase of mystery.

If this is true about the physical universe, how much more it is true with our own human lives. Events in a person’s life cannot be simply explained with single cause and effect theories. There is a kind of relativity in human existence — an indeterminacy — an openness, a freedom that cannot always be easily predicted.

If a person becomes mentally disturbed, it can no longer be said simply that “this or that was the cause.” Instead, there seems to be a convergence of many, many causes and events which all play into the scene. So much so that one person who seems to live in an almost identical situa-tion will turn out quite differently from another.

What seems to drive one person to a mental breakdown, will only enhance another. We’ve all seen this. A child coming from a good home will go bad and on the other hand, a child coming from the worst possible situation will turn out to be a saint. This is not to say that home and environment and all that go with it are not important. But it is to say that we cannot simply explain a person’s behavior, his decisions, the tragedies which come into his life, by simple cause and effect. There is always an element of mystery, of indeterminacy, of freedom of decision which is involved.

Fosdick once wrote — It’s a queer business this human ad-venture of ours, and the older a person is the queerer it seems. Everything about it is strange, from birth where a single cell has carried over on its slender bridge what an amazing weight of inherited possibility from the

race behind! That is queer — until death, when this mysteriously compounded organism dissolves into its elements — which is queerer yet!

And between birth and death, how the loveliness of life snuggles close to its tragedy. A little child, beautiful today, crippled tomorrow; great nations rising to world power and then falling like houses of sand built by children on the shore, when the tides of destiny flow in; great servants of the public good blotted out while some old rogue drags on his worse-than-useless life; righteous-ness and rottenness; beautiful homes and insane asylums; glorious creative work and unemployment; the laughter of little children and 300 burned to death in a prison--it's a queer business.

And the answer to these mysteries of life — to the question of the disciples of the man born blind — "Who sinned: this man or his parents?" is not quite that simple.

What then can we say to these mysteries — to the things that happen to us and others for which we earnestly wish we knew, the causes? What did Jesus answer his disciples and how does that answer fit our situation?

1. First, we need to have a distrust of easy, rigid, dog-matic answers. If a child goes wrong and someone says--the cause is that you let him play with that delinquent child in the neighborhood — then you'd better have a healthy distrust of such a simple explanation. What goes into making a person what he is, is a whole variety of causes and events and influences and people and his own decisions and not any one event-or person or mistake. To be sure, some one event or happening may be the final triggering cause that pushes someone over the line, but it wouldn't have pushed him over unless there were a whole variety of other events before that.

Thus, whenever you see anyone standing over against the mysteries of life, whipping off finalities as though he could settle it with one simple answer — be careful.

And when you ask yourself the question after some tragedy or event — "Where did I go wrong," the answer is very likely not going to be merely one thing, one cause.

2. Secondly, the Bible seems to imply that even though we cannot easily explain the cause always, there is light enough to live by. We see through a glass darkly, but we do see. Thus, there are times when what we need to do is to take the situation as it exists, and instead of merely worrying about the cause — allow God to turn it into some-thing good. That's what Jesus did with the man born blind in our text. He didn't explain the cause; but he said in effect — this blindness can be used for God's glory.

Our religion, our faith does not clear up all the mysteries of life. In fact, sometimes more harm has been done than wise work will undo by those who have pretended to easily clear up the mysteries of life.

We cannot adequately answer the parents of a defective child by simple explanations. Or who has the answer to the mystery of sudden accidental death? Our faith does not give a simple formula with which to answer all questions and clear up all mystery. On the contrary, at the center of our faith is the deepest mystery of all-- the cross, where love was nailed to the cross by hate.

But what our faith does, is to give us a kind of life and power within to sustain it; a life that can be lived joyously, triumphantly, amid mystery — we can even celebrate mystery, in the knowledge that we have enough light to walk by.

3. Thirdly, remember the answer which Jesus gave to his disciples when they asked — "who sinned: this man or his parents that he was born blind?" Jesus said, "Neither this man or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him."

This does not mean that God deliberately caused the man to be born blind, but rather in God's world, things like this can and do happen; and more importantly that God can take any of us as we are, with our handicaps, and use us and our handicaps for his glory; his work.

Jesus is also saying to us that when some tragedy comes, when something goes wrong, without any seeming sensible explanation — it doesn't help just to seek some simple one cause way back somewhere and let it go at that. What good would it have done if Jesus could've honestly told his disciples that it was this man's sin or his parent's sin that caused his blindness. Would that have helped the man? Would it have made him feel better? In fact, as we pointed out earlier in this sermon, to find some simple cause is probably not only false, but also misleading and may keep us from turning the handicap into something glorious.

So, Jesus began with the man where he was. He in effect said, "Your blindness can help do the work of God." And he took the blindness and made something good out of it. In this case he healed the man. But healing in this sense may not always be the outcome. Take Helen Keller, for example; if she had spent all her time worrying about whether it was her sin, or her parent's sins, or her grandparents' sin, or whatever, which caused her to be blind and deaf, she would not have developed into the miracle she became. She had to begin where she was with the help of her teacher. Rather than worry about the cause, she took the effect and turned it into a miracle.

So, it may be with us. Somehow or other, mystery or no mystery, cause or effect, we must manage to carry on with the business of living. But our energies for living can be depleted by mere negative reactions to the mysteries of life.

On the other hand, this story of the man born blind and Jesus' answer to his disciples tells us that we too can go on triumphantly. For in us too, in our pain, through our loss, our sorrow, or disability, whatever it may be, even through our mistakes, the works of God can be made manifest.

In fact, in this case, the man born blind, just because of his disability, he became a striking symbol and proof of what God can affect. A whole man would have been of no use to Christ in this way. It was his blindness, his handicap, that gave him his chance to be of special service to the Master. Amen.