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Lent IV

March 15, 2026

Text: John 9:1 – 41

Title: Karma? I'll Take Grace! (based on a sermon from CPR)

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. If there is one word that can describe my personal taste in music, it's eclectic. I love singing hymns and choir music, but you usually won't find me listening to it during the week. It's more likely that you'll hear me enjoying something from Billy Joel, Guns & Roses, or Big and Rich, but it's not out of the realm of possibility that I could be enjoying the soundtrack from *The Phantom of the Opera*. There's a great variety of music out there to enjoy.

One group that I have a love/hate opinion of is the band U2. They've definitely a popular and influential group over the years, and that's mostly because of their lead singer, Bono. Like the band's biggest songs, he comes across as larger than life, but he's not just famous for the music that he makes with his band. He also makes news for his humanitarian work, especially fighting AIDS in Africa. Normally, I'm a little cynical about celebrities doing such things, but even I have to say, Bono has a streak of sincerity in him that impresses me, sometimes.

A few years ago he gave an interview and was asked what his motivation was for his seemingly tireless work, and Bono answered, "It's a mind-blowing concept that the God who created the entire universe might be looking for company, a real relationship with people like me, but the thing that keeps me on my knees is the difference between Grace and Karma."

It's definitely not a small thing to take on karma. John Lennon sang about instant karma that's gonna get you. People are told that to be happy you need to have good karma. But what is it? Karma is the idea that what goes around comes around, that there's a kind of cosmic justice that drives the inner workings of the universe – in a way I talked about it last week. Karma has

two sides. The first is that bad people suffer from bad things because of who they are or what they do to others. Many people have probably reached the conclusion that the Iranians are suffering because they deserve it more than others. The merciless way that their leaders operate has resulted in being struck by stronger countries. They're getting what they deserve.

On the other side of the coin, people who are good to others will have good things happen to them. There's a practice out there that you might run across every now and then that some call pay-it-forward. An example of that is when someone randomly pays for the Big Mac Meal of the person in the car behind them. Some people consider this idea to be good karma, and believe that doing it is supposed to turn fate in your favor somehow so that good things come your own way by doing good for someone else.

As the singer, Bono put it in the interview that I mentioned earlier, "You see, at the center of all religions is the idea of karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you; an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth; in the laws of physics it's put that every action is met by an equal and opposite reaction." His words sound good to a lot of people. We like to see things this way because it makes sense to us, and it makes us feel good about ourselves. We like to think of ourselves as good people, and we like to think we're better than others. When someone does something wrong we think, "He'll get his sooner or later," or "What goes around comes around." We try to make sense of the world this way, and we take solace in the idea that evil doesn't go unpunished. But then evil people do get away with things, and we don't know what to think.

And when we do see bad things happen to people, we try to insulate ourselves from the tragedy of it. We assume that a person is getting paid back for evil or foolish behavior. So if someone dies suddenly of a heart attack, we say, "Well, he ate too much and didn't exercise, so it's pretty much his own fault." A man has cancer? Well, he smoked for 25 years what do you

expect. Kidney problems? Drank too much. Car accident? Drove too fast, and was always messing with her cell phone.

While any of that may be true, it not only shows no compassion, but it doesn't take into account the fact that we will all die because we all sin. There's no room for gloating because we are all worthy of death. There's only repentance. Because in the end, sin must be paid for, and it is paid for by Christ. When a man is born blind, the disciples in today's Gospel reading jump to the popular assumption of the day, either he sinned while still in the womb, or his parents sinned in some grievous way. "Who sinned? This man or his parents?" And that's the kind of question that we're comfortable with, the kind of question that attempts to make sense of the world by our own wisdom. They're asking a question of karma, who is getting what they deserved?

I know what I'd say to the karma question. And I know that I definitely wouldn't give the karma answer. Why? Because one common sin infects us all. Sure, certain sins have specific consequences built into the way that the world works, but death is eventually going to get every one of us, no matter how well we live and no matter how righteous we think we might be. We've all sinned and all creation suffers because of it. The world is broken.

And that's the simple truth. That's the answer to give, along with a quote or two from a couple of old, dead Lutheran scholars and maybe a selected passage from the Bible. It's the simple doctrinal answer. But Jesus doesn't offer a simple doctrinal answer to His disciples in today's text. Instead, He says, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."

Talk about mind blowing! Sin in all its negativity has actually set in motion a chain of events that ends not with disaster, but with mysterious blessing! Is that even possible? We are moving closer to Holy Week, when we will gaze upon the Passion of our Lord. In the other

three Gospels Jesus' final miracle is the healing of blind Bartimaeus, who then follows Jesus as He makes His way to the cross. Today though, in John's Gospel we hear of another blind man given sight as the Old Testament reading from Isaiah tells us, "...I will lead the blind in a way that they do not know, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the thing I do, and I do not forsake them."

The disciples would explain blindness or other suffering as a result of some sin that made one person especially deserving of it. They're in the karma camp, and probably would have had quite the conversation with Bono. "If karma was finally going to be my judge," he said in that interview, "then I'd be in really deep stuff."

But then that interview took a different turn as he continued, "I'm holding out for grace; I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to depend on my own spirituality in the end." It was never God's plan that man fall into sin. It was never God's intention that there would be illness and death from things like a global pandemic or war between countries, or that men would be born blind. And yet in the mystery of His grace, in the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world, our Lord took a fallen situation and not only restored it, but made it better than it ever was. By the mystery of the incarnation and the glory of the cross, we have come to see God as we never could before: face-to-face, in full and sacrificial love. We have experienced a love that has been tested, a love that has been challenged, a love that goes beyond a mutually beneficial relationship. And having been forgiven much, what can we do but fall to our knees?

Yes, God loves the angels. But the angels are good. And it's easy to love those who love you in return. Even the pagans do this. But we have received a greater love. We have been

shown a more beautiful grace. God has taken us sinful creatures and turned us into His children. And no, the world still hasn't found what it's looking for; for the world in its worldliness is blind; the world looks at the baptismal font, and they don't think it's worth a bucket of spit. But we, whose eyes have been opened, we see a crystal fountain. We see a river of Living Water flowing from the throne of God, and the Lamb who has been slain but now lives again!

It's ironic and rare when a celebrity says something about faith that is correct, and to get things about God's grace and Christianity in particular correct is even more rare. But in that interview a few years ago, Bono was right. It's a miracle that the God of the universe is seeking out the company of people like us! But that's what He has done! What happened to the man born blind? Well, we know that he was kicked out of the synagogue, and became an outcast. His own parents distanced themselves from him, and the community ostracized him, treated him as the lowest of the low.

But the Lord Jesus went the extra mile when He heard about what happened, and He sought him out to reveal Himself fully to him. It was at that point, that the man could finally declare, "Lord, I believe!" It was then that he could finally worship the Lord. Jesus took the friendship and mercy that He showed when He healed the man, and He turned it into full and complete communion with him.

To our ears the whole idea of karma sounds good. It's nice to believe that what goes around comes around, and that people will eventually get what they deserve. But in the end, I don't want what I deserve because I know what I really deserve. I'd much rather have Grace than Karma. No matter how good any of us sing, we'll probably never be famous for it. But we can know for certain that we sing together the song of the Lamb, the song of praise to the One who breaks the darkness, and who lets us see Him face to face. Amen. In the name...