

As a product of the 1980's, I truly appreciate the nostalgia I have seen for the decade in which I grew up. For example, many schools during their spirit week or our own First Lutheran during National Lutheran Schools Week will feature an 80's dress-up day. What's more, on any given day you can see high school and college-aged young people wearing Converse Chuck Taylor's All-Star Basketball shoes. I've also noticed the return, for better or for worse, of the mullet, a hair style that is "Business in the front and a party in the back". What's more I've noticed young people wearing t-shirts of rock bands that made it big during that decade. One band that was very popular back then and is still together today is called "U2". They even have their own Sirius XM satellite radio station, along with the likes of the Beatles, Frank Sinatra, and Willie Nelson. So U2 is definitely still a force to be reckoned with, as is their lead singer. Like the band's anthems, Bono is larger than life. Along with his music, he's been in the news for his humanitarian work, especially fighting AIDS in Africa.

When he was asked once about what drives him, what makes him tick, Bono gave an amazing answer; especially amazing, I think, for a rock star. He said, "It's a mind-blowing concept that the God who created the universe might be looking for company, a real relationship with people, but the thing that keeps me on my knees is *the difference between Grace and Karma.*"

Now, it's no small thing to take on karma in the public square. You hear a lot of people talk about karma nowadays, but what exactly is it? Karma is the idea that what goes around comes around, that there's a kind of justice that drives the inner workings of the universe. Do a google and you can watch all kind of videos of people getting what's called "instant karma". There is one video I saw of a man driving his big pick up who has some obvious and serious anger issues. He aggressively tailgates a woman, and then passes her, while triumphantly waving at her in a most impolite manner. And just after that, his truck spins out, and he crashes into a ditch. Ah, there's karma for you, "The world's best boomerang!" and people love it. That man got what was coming to him.

Then on the opposite side, there's the pay-it-forward movement. It is said to be **good** karma if you do a random act of kindness, like paying for the person's coffee who's behind you in line at the coffee shop or buying an entire meal for a family that is behind you in the fast-food drive-thru line. When you pay it forward like this, it is said to "set the motions of the universe in your favor."

As Bono puts it, "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 physical laws every action is met by an equal and opposite one."

And so, we come to our Gospel lesson today: Jesus is walking along, and comes across a man born blind. And the disciples ask the karma question, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?"

And this is the kind of question that we're comfortable with, the kind of question that tries to make sense of the world. A man has cancer? Well, yeah, he smoked two packs a day for thirty years. No wonder! Kidney problems? She drank too much. Heart attack? Not enough diet and exercise. Car accident? Drove too fast and was probably texting. The young guy who's lost his hair? Well, there must be some reason.

So, why **was** this man born blind? Was it because of his sin? Or perhaps the sin of his parents? I know what I'd say in response to the karma question. And I know I **wouldn't** give the karma answer. I'd say that one common sin infects us all. Sure, certain sins have specific consequences, built into the way the world functions, but death is going to get each and every one of us, no matter how well we live, and no matter how righteous we think we may be. We've all sinned, and all creation suffers. The world is broken.

And that's true. If I were to have given an answer like that back when I was at seminary and added a quote or two from a dogmatic theologian, I just might have gotten an "A". **But**, that's not what Jesus says! Jesus doesn't offer a simple dogmatic answer. Instead, He says, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him" (v 3). 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 possible?

And do we really want to gloat about karma? Do we really want to take pleasure in someone getting his or her comeuppance? “If karma was finally going to be my judge,” the singer Bono said, “then I’d be in deep ...” Well, let’s just say he said, “trouble.” He said he’d be in “deep trouble” if karma was going to be his final judge. And so would we.

Then Bono added, “*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 religiosity.” That is the Gospel! That is Grace! And it is most certainly amazing!

It was never God’s plan that mankind would fall into sin. It was never God’s intention that there would be illness and death, or that men would be born blind.

And yet, 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. And now a paradise better than Eden awaits us.

You and I 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 unbelievers do this. But we have received a greater love. We have been shown a more beautiful grace. He has taken us creatures and turned us into 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 thinks that what happens here isn’t worth anything. But we, whose eyes have been opened, see a crystal fountain, a river of life flowing from the throne of God, and the Lamb who has been slain.

Bono's right. It's a miracle that the God of the universe is seeking out people like us. But that's what He's done.

So, what happened to the man born blind? Well, we know he became an outcast. His own parents distanced themselves from him, and the community ostracized him. But our Lord then went the extra mile and sought him out. Our Lord Jesus took friendship and mercy and turned it into full communion.

So, yeah, karma sounds cool. Most people seem to believe in it. But on this one, I'm with Bono. I'd rather have grace. You and I may never be rock stars, but we can join together with him in another band, if you will-another choir, and sing together the song of the Lamb around His and the Father's throne forever! That is grace, and it is amazing! Amen