

“The Blame Game?”

Mark 15:22-39 – April 10, 2009

It doesn't take many news reports to get us wondering about who's responsible when bad things happen—especially to children. When things go wrong, it seems we need to blame somebody. A 4-month old baby is left alone in a day care center van and dies. A 7 year old girl dies in a duplex fire. A mother and toddler die in a car crash. A 13-month old is killed while in foster care. When things go wrong, somebody is responsible someplace and many times we look for someone to blame.

In our current economic times, we've done a good job of blaming the president, both past and present, and people from Bernie Madoff all the way to a neighbor who overextended on their mortgage. We find ourselves in situations where we blame our bosses for being too demanding, our neighbors for our basement water problem, our kid's teachers for the bad report card, our spouses for a bad decision, and our in-laws—maybe just for being in-laws!

“As humans, living within social networks, we insist when things go right or wrong that someone caused them and should take responsibility for the consequences, good or bad. People expend a lot of energy, then, assigning that responsibility to themselves or others. We're passionate about wanting to make sure others are getting what we think they deserve and, at the same time, we often try to prevent others from doing the same to us (unless they're giving us credit, of course!).”

(Homiletics, 4/09)

Blame can drive a wedge between people that creates a “worthy us and an unworthy them.”

(Charles Tilly) If the situation is somebody else's responsibility, and they've somehow handled it poorly, we've evaluated their performance and found it lacking. We are more worthy than them.

Even though most people know better, I believe the Good Friday story tends to resurface blame for Jewish people. Hearing this story again, may lead us to try and point a finger someplace—somebody killed this man. The reality is that Jesus was someone who “challenged the domination system” of his time. “He was executed as a rebel against Rome, between two other rebels against Rome. The decision of the temple authorities to take action against him was made after his disruptive act in the temple. (when he denounced the scribes and Pharisees) These local collaborators handed him over to imperial authority, which then crucified him on a charge that he was simultaneously political and religious: ‘King of the Jews.’ Yet the temple authorities did not represent the Jews. Rather than representing the Jewish people, they were, as local collaborators with imperial authority, the oppressors of the vast majority of the Jewish people. They did not represent the Jewish people any more than the collaborationist governments of Europe during WWII represented their people.” *(The Last Week – Borg & Crossan)*

We may try to point a finger someplace, but we end up realizing that human beings, and the systems we have created, are responsible for Jesus' death on the cross.

“Mark tells us that there was plenty of blame to go around. The cross was the intersection and focal point of the worst kinds of human evil. At the top of the list were the religious authorities who, ironically, accused an innocent Jesus of ‘blasphemy’ while heaping blame upon him in a sham trial and hasty sentence. The Roman Empire, represented by Pontius Pilate, was guilty, too, of using its violence as a way of both provoking and placating its subjects. Even Jesus' closest friends make the list — one having betrayed him and the rest having abandoned him. If anyone had reason to assign blame to the whole of humanity, it was Jesus.” *(Homiletics, 4/09)*

On Good Friday a trail of blame may lead us to the cross, yet the one hanging there doesn't seem to blame anyone for his plight. We don't find him hurling bitter words at anyone. The two other rebels who were crucified with Jesus said cruel things to him. And those in the crowd mocked him with comments like “He saved others; he cannot save himself.”

Yet, Jesus doesn't utter a word of blame toward anyone, even those who had beaten and tortured him. The words of Jesus that we do have record of, come from the Gospel of Luke, and they are a prayer of mercy for his tormentors: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

We might wonder if Jesus blames God for this situation, when we read the words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34).

What we may not immediately recognize is that those are the words from Psalm 22. “In the tradition of the time, when a person quoted the first line of a passage it was as if he or she was quoting the whole thing; thus Jesus brings the whole witness of the psalm to his cry from the cross.” *(Homiletics, 4/09)*

We just read that Psalm a few minutes ago, and it doesn't conclude the way it begins. It outlines all the terrible experiences the person is going through, but all the way along, it reminds us that God is hasn't left them alone. And it ends with words of praise for God.

"Psalm 22 is a prayer of lament, but it is also a hymn of praise. The writer looks at his suffering from the other side, from the place of restoration and healing, and sees that God never abandoned him. When we stop reading the psalm after verse 1, we miss the rest of the story. But when we read the whole psalm, we realize that Jesus' cry is not one of blame but of hope and confidence" in the God who stands by us in our suffering. It's important to note, that neither Jesus nor the psalmist seems to be assigning blame to God as the cause of his plight." *(Homiletics, 4/09)*

Sometimes when we can't find an answer to a situation, especially if things have gone bad, God becomes the recipient of our blame. For all the "why" questions, "Why did God do this to me?" "Why did God let this happen to that person?" our inability to find an leads us to just say "God did this" and isn't it awful.

I want to make clear that I believe God can receive our anger and our frustration, and I believe understands our humanity enough to know where our response is coming from. But many of the situations we encounter, I believe have little to do with God directly making something happen. Our human bodies are not perfect, things go wrong. Our human decision making is not always so great and we sometimes make bad decisions that get us into great difficulty.

A story about a mistake from Brigham Young University made its way into our local paper this week. Thousands of issues of their University student newspaper were pulled from newsstands because a front-page photo caption misidentified leaders of the Mormon Church as apostates instead of apostles. An apostate is a person who has abandoned religious faith, principles or a cause. The mistake happened when a copy editor ran a spell check and apostate was suggested as a replacement for a misspelling of apostle. Unfortunately the copy editor clicked on apostate and two more sets of eyes proofreading the paper didn't catch it. What's interesting is that the University recognized it was just an honest mistake. And no university or church administrator has sought to punish anyone. *(Journal-Sentinel, 4/8/09)*

Sometimes human error can lead us in bad directions. Because the rulers of the day were believing that Jesus threatened their authority, they were led to kill him. Yet, the one we follow didn't seem to play the blame game. He could see the process unfolding, he knew how he had lived his life, and he knew humanity very well. In the midst of the horrible events of his crucifixion, he was able to offer a word of forgiveness to those who were orchestrating these events. And most of all, he continued to trust in God—that the God who had accompanied him through his life on this earth, would not leave him now.

At those points in our lives when we are tempted to judge and blame others, we might want to step back, and remember the events of Good Friday. And that we follow someone who wasn't practicing the blame game even on that awful day.

--Sue Burwell