

BLAME

Hosea 11: 1-9; Mark 1: 40-45

Have you ever been blamed for something you did to someone? Maybe it's what you said about them. Maybe it's how you treated them. Maybe it's how you neglected them. Maybe it was never your intention to cause the kind of hurt or upset you are accused of. Maybe the blame is false to the facts. But let's face it, being blamed and blaming in return is a huge part of our lives.

Blame is everywhere in the news and on social media too. Whether there is truth to the blame or not, being blamed for something and having enough others convinced you are to blame, can destroy your reputation and your life. Think about the me-too-movement, Black-lives-Matter, and the discovery of graves of indigenous children for example. Blame is about justice, accountability and responsibility. But think about what politicians and campaigns do. Blame gets thrown around like a weapon and the key is to never let it stick but deflect it onto someone else. We blame and we get blamed and the legal system is working 24-7 prosecuting, defending and settling lawsuit after lawsuit. We are a society of blame and we are people entangled in blaming and shaming others as much as we seek desperately to avoid getting blamed and shamed ourselves.

OK, preacher, yes. Blame is everywhere and we would be lying if we didn't admit that we are guilty of blaming and shaming as much as we may accuse others of it. But so what. Speaking truth and standing up for justice requires blaming and even shaming those responsible no? People need to be held accountable, no? Judging a person or group as responsible for some injustice requires some blaming, no? How else do we bring about change?

Yes, but what if blaming also involves self-deception, denial, and most serious of all: the loss of compassion? Is blame worth it if you lose your heart and soul in the process? OK, preacher, what are you talking about? Let's dive into our scripture readings in search of revelatory insight. And in this regard, let me offer three points.

1) First of all, putting a lot of our energy blaming someone else may be a way to deflect responsibility from ourselves and our own actions. In our reading from the prophet Hosea, we are brought into the conflicted relationship between the Hebrew people and God. The prophet speaks in God's voice, and the prophecy is about both blame and mercy. The people have been blaming God for letting them down. They are being defeated by the Assyrian empire and the losses are staggering. Why has God not protected them? Why has God not saved them? They are God's chosen people. God liberated them out of slavery in Egypt. God was like a loving parent to them. God made a covenant with them to be their protector and guide. Shouldn't that be insurance and guarantee of success and victory?

But the prophecy is reminding them that they have not kept faith with God. They have become influenced by the nations around them and sacrificed to their gods. They have failed the standards of God's justice and betrayed the commandments. Those at the top have amassed wealth for themselves and neglected those at the bottom. In fact, they have created greater and greater gaps of inequality and suffering. How can they be a light to other nations if they simply copy worldly patterns of oppression and injustice?

Before blaming God or anyone else, God's people should look in the mirror and face the blame in themselves. They are guilty. They have failed. They need to go down on their knees and get in touch with the terms of their covenant with God. Faithfulness to God also means building a society of justice and care. Faithfulness to God means treating God's creation as a gift to be cherished not used and abused for cheap and fleeting pleasures.

So then, the first rule our scriptures offer us if we have the courage to follow it is this: look in the mirror before you point the finger. How do we participate in the very things we accuse others of doing? How are we to blame for situations that have led to conflict, neglect, bad consequences and troubled relationships? Blame is never one way and never as simple as we want to make it. Looking in the mirror may be uncomfortable. But it also humanizes us. It forces us to see others we are blaming as not so terribly different than we are. It may take the force out of our blaming. But it will lead to fairer and more humane directions in our fight for truth and justice.

2) And this leads to point number two. Too often the people we are blaming are also victims themselves. In our gospel reading, Jesus encounters a leper who is seeking healing for his condition. The way Jesus responds, though, is anything but typical. Lepers were blamed for being lepers. Somehow it was believed that their lifestyle and their moral flaws were responsible for making them vulnerable to the disease.

And more than that, leprosy was a disgusting disease. By blaming the victims people could justify their emotional distancing and lack of compassion. Blame gives us a way out of having to feel sad for people who are suffering. Blame gives us a way out of feeling responsible for having to help them too. And being disgusted by other people gives us a further reason to stay away and pretend we don't see them. This is what happened with the Aids crisis in the 80s and 90s. It was the gay lifestyle that created the disease, many believed. And so, why invest all the energy and resources to care for them and spend research dollars seeking a cure or at least treatment for the effects of the disease. In fact, many so called Christian groups interpreted the disease as God's judgement on gay people just like God judged and punished people in the bible.

And in case we think we are more enlightened decades later, think about how we treat drug addicts and all the victims of overdoses in our cities and towns. As much as addiction of any kind is a disease that overpowers victims, we often treat it as a moral flaw and convince

ourselves that tough love is the way. This has to mean punishment or letting victims suffer the consequences without our compassionate care, without funding safe injection sites and treatment programs... This is awful!

In the gospels such so called 'tough love' is called: hardness of heart. Jesus can't get to people's hearts if they're hardened. In total contrast we're told that when Jesus encounters the leper he is "moved with pity." Pity, here, doesn't mean feeling sorry for someone as if they're crippled in a way we're not. No. Pity means we allow ourselves to feel for someone else, seeing ourselves in them were circumstances different. We are all human beings and sometimes some of us may be broken in ways others are not. Jesus is motivated from his heart outwards. That's what drives him to reach out and touch the leper. Past social stigma and disgust, Jesus will see the human being in the leper and reach out and touch him. The physical healing follows the heart-to-heart connection.

What about you and me? Blame hardens our hearts. Blame distances our feelings from others. Blame disfigures our souls. Be careful if a lot of your inner energy is being taken up with blame. Don't let your heart get hardened. Ask God to come in and break your heart open so you can feel and be "moved with pity."

3) Finally, let's get back to the prophet Hosea and the picture of God he opens up for us. God is depicted in very human ways as far as emotions go. God is angry with the people. God wants to blame the people. But God also has heart and God's heart always wins out in how God will act: "How can I give you up and how can I hand you over, O Israel?... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger..." why? "For I am God and no mortal, the holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath." What distinguishes the Holy One from us mere mortals is a love that is unbreakable, a love that will not be swallowed up by wrath and revenge. Our call as mortals is to be shaped by such love. Our call as mortals is to allow such love to flow into us and sweep away our hard-heartedness and our insatiable energy to blame and even shame those who anger and outrage us. Yes to justice, but never at the cost of our hearts.

Today is also Reformation Sunday. 500 years ago in Europe, there was a protest movement. That's why we call ourselves protestants. What were we protesting? We were protesting a world where blame, used by the greatest institution in society, greater than any nation or government, the church, kept people enslaved. People were made to believe that their eternal destiny was controlled by the church. How you behaved and whether the church approved would guarantee your eternal salvation or damnation... you and your family too.

What protestant reformers like Luther and Calvin discovered as they read and reread their bibles was that God is love and a love that is all-powerful. God will not come in wrath. God's compassion is warm and tender as the prophet says. This means that the only motivation in life that must drive us is love. Whether we're outraged at the injustices around us, whether we're

grief-stricken by the abuses and losses of life, whether we are burdened by responsibility for making the world better, our communities better, our relationships with the earth and those around us better... God wants us to be "moved with pity" to act, to think, to feel and to engage. No other human should control us and no other institution either. The church must be a place and a space for communal engagement, worship and discernment of the path we must take to serve the world through compassion.

This is as true for us today as it was for our protestant forbears 500 years ago. So then, before we go on blaming, let's begin by looking in the mirror and pointing the finger at ourselves first. And before we condemn another human being, let us recognize the victim in the human and the brokenness that lives in us too. There are so many things that shape our life outcomes and many of those things are not simple or obvious or visible. Let us always be moved with pity before we are driven by blame. Finally, may we worship a God who unlike so many of us will not come in wrath, a God whose heart grows warm and tender with compassion. May such a God who is love flow in and through us warming our hearts until they become ever more tender with compassion.

This is our call – you and me. Will we worship such a God of compassion? Will we follow a Jesus who is moved with pity to engage, connect and act? Will we open our hearts to the energy and power of such love we call Holy Spirit in our protesting church? How you and I answer such questions will shape our destiny going forward, and our destiny as a spiritual community we call Armour Heights.

Amen.