

# The Blame Game

sermon digest

April 10, 2011

John 9:1-16

larry dipboye

The question as old as religion, at least as old as the Book of Job. What is the connection between sin and suffering? The disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

The article in *Sojourners* magazine (10-16-2009), written at the height of the healthcare debate, puts the question in a more relevant context. The father of a child with Asperger's Syndrome, a form of autism, raised the question: "Who Sinned that this Child Was Born Uninsurable?" He observed that one out of 150 children is diagnosed with some form of autism spectrum disorder; they are born that way. For insurance purposes, they have a "pre-existing condition"; thus, they are uninsurable even if the family has insurance. The father wonders about the future of his son. Neither the boy nor his parents engaged in some kind of reckless behavior that caused the disability. Why should he be denied access to healthcare? The father asks, "Who sinned that this child should be marginalized and excluded from full participation in society as a person of sacred worth?" Maybe the question raised by the disciples is not so farfetched.

The science of healing did not exist at the time of Christ. Modern medicine has only been around for some 150 years. There were physicians in Israel and medications for various ailments, but healing looked more like magic than medicine. Jesus was a healer in the context of his culture and time. He did not have access to antibiotics, anesthesia, surgery, or hospitals. He employed the tools known at the time, like spit and dirt.

**Accusation does not solve problems.** Since human health was tied to the continuing work of the Creator, disease as well as healing were closely associated with religion. In the ongoing debate about the historical, factual, scientific analysis of biblical miracles, we fail to realize that the only real hope for healing in that world was miracle, an act of God. If divine intervention was the only possibility for relief, the problem must connect to some human act or attitude offending God. Thus, the cause of any illness or a disability like congenital blindness necessarily related to sin. Diagnosis was a personal process, a blame game, a whodunit. The disciples did not know to ask, "what causes congenital blindness?" The suffering related to the condition of implied punishment by the Creator, so they raised their theological inquiry within the limits of their understanding: "Who sinned?" Fixing the blame was about as high as they could reach.

A topic of rabbinic discussion included the possibility of fetal sin. According to Genesis, Jacob and Esau were born wrestling for their father's favor; the twins came into the world with Jacob grasping the heel of his brother Esau. Jacob's dishonesty was thus viewed as a congenital condition; he was born that way. The possibility that the man born blind brought the condition upon himself was not outside the bounds of possibility in that world. This not only settled the discussion, it relieved the disciples of any responsibility for his station in life.

Even if the man did not bring the condition upon himself, the Ten Commandments clearly stated: "I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents (Ex. 20:5)." The common wisdom of Israel came in the form of a proverb: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." The disciples were not looking for healing; they were seeking a reasonable basis for passing down the road and leaving the man to manage his own problems.

The ancient issues are not totally disconnected from our modern age. What about the crack babies and the fetal alcohol syndrome that causes mental, emotional, and physical dysfunction? Even in the world of modern medicine it seems that the sins of the parents are passed on to the next generation. Are we the helpless victims of our DNA passed from one generation to the next? Are all of the problems of humanity traceable to our biological origins justifying the solution of applied genocide to the defective gene pools? Hitler had a final solution for what he believed to be a racial defect. If we cannot fix the problem, maybe we can fix the blame. We can ignore suffering in favor of a sigh of relief that we do not share in the cause; therefore, we have no responsibility for people who are less fortunate than we.

Richard Lischer charged: "the church has always been pretty good at investigating irregularities but not so good at acknowledging the power of God that can be contained by no religious premises

(*Christian Century*, March 3, 1999, p. 245).” Lischer observed that restoring sight to the blind man was done in two verses of John 9. The other thirty-nine verses are a comedy of paralysis by analysis. The Pharisees did what we are prone to do: launch an investigation to ascertain the facts and find a reasonable explanation. They wanted to deny the restoration of the man’s sight, but when the miracle became obvious, they decided that it had taken place illegally, on the Sabbath, or without authority.

In Seminary chapel services, Wayne Oates was responsible for the faculty sermon. Oates was something of a rebel, always somewhat at odds with administrative concerns protecting the institution in favor of people issues. His sermon was a slow, careful reading of John 9 with occasional facial expressions of total dismay or a chuckle at the ridiculous display of paranoia. Jesus steps out of the picture after the instruction to “wash in the pool of Siloam” and returns at the end of the story after the man had been driven out of the synagogue. The bulk of the story is about the circular movements and logic that seeks to comprehend the event and rationalize it so that it could be managed by the authorities. The one missing element in the religious leaders and in the disciples of Jesus is any sense of responsibility for the blind beggar. The healing event is loaded with symbols. It is about the identity of Jesus, the light of the world, and about a worse kind of blindness, a lack of spiritual vision. Here the accusers stand accused.

***We are responsible*** . On the road to Jerusalem and the cross, the conflict with authority often centered in the healing ministry of Jesus. He was accused of being in league with demons. He was charged with blasphemy in offering absolution for the sins and guilt that cause paralysis. He was especially criticized for healing on the Sabbath, thus, violating the rules and regulations that maintained the institutions of religion without regard or concern for the people involved.

Jesus had no interest in the blame game. He found nothing redemptive in the usual rabbinic word chase. “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” Jesus declared. He preferred to act on the healing side of the problem. For Christ, a birth defect became an opportunity to glorify God. Jesus reflected another Judaic tradition, *I am my brother’s keeper*. With the Good Samaritan, I share the pain of the one lying beside the road bleeding even when I can absolve myself of guilt or blame for his condition and even when I can justify passing by on the other side.

When we get caught up in a scientific analysis of miracles in the New Testament, we are no better than the Pharisees. They were not able to determine through interrogation of witnesses and the man himself exactly what happened. Neither are we. But a matter of much greater importance is at stake: “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.”

One matter far exceeds our need to know. In fact, there are some things in this life we will never know or understand. They are beyond our grasp. We are not Gnostics, people who know. We are believers, people who walk by faith in a loving God. We are not required to solve all of the world’s problems, to cure all of the diseases, or to end all of the world’s crises. But we are responsible for one another. Finally our lives are in the hands of a loving God.

A new parish priest came to town in the little village of Olney, England. He had not always been a priest. In fact, he had been the captain of a ship involved in the cruel slave trade. As the story goes, he was brought to his knees during a storm at sea. His conversion experience first led to giving up the market of human flesh and eventually led to a commitment to serving the church. John Henry Newton became the rector of the parish in Olney and began to write hymns to serve the needs of his congregation. One of those hymns received little notice at the time. He reflected the story of Jesus about the lost son, “I once was lost but now am found,” and the story of the man born blind, “was blind but now I see.” (Cf. Matthew Myer Boulton, *Christian Century*, March 22, 2011, p. 23)