

The Rev. Cornel Barnett, D.Min.
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
April 3, 2011
John 9:1-41
"The Blame Game"

The Gospel reading is half the sermon because it's long and it's a good story. My sermon will briefly comment on the "blame" aspect of the story.

The phrase "the blame game" has been bandied about in politics. Blaming is as old as the hills. To be human is to breathe, to think, to love and unfortunately to blame. British writer, Rudyard Kipling, who received the Nobel Prize for Literature 100 years ago, began his famous poem "If" with the words:

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you...

There are two references to blaming in a recent Time Magazine. In an article on crying at work both men and women said they would shed tears when they were unfairly blamed or criticized for something. Former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf was called out in an interview for blaming the US and the West for pulling out of Afghanistan before the former Taliban takeover.

Whether that was fair or unfair blaming, it seems that people like to blame and most of the time it's a put down.

Blaming makes us feel more powerful and more in control of our lives. Clearly, we reason, we are smarter, stronger, healthier, luckier, and have our lives more together, so nothing like that could ever happen to us. Blaming is one way to avoid feeling powerless when someone else's life is in crisis.

The gospel story today is an excellent case in point. Jesus' disciples and the Pharisees play the blame game.

The disciples more innocently see a blind man and ask Jesus: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?" In Jesus' day, blindness was interpreted as a punishment for human sin. Jesus wants none of that.

He replies: "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him." This must not be seen as a malicious divine force, i.e., God, who causes blindness at birth in order to do good by restoring sight in life nor should it be seen that bad things happen to show God's good works. Injury happens to everyone and when it does it can produce enormous acts of care and compassion which is God's goodness. Sometimes a person or situation gets well, such as the case of the blind man in the gospel story, and sometimes she, he or it doesn't, but love is unleashed.

The healing of the blind man creates jealousy among some Pharisees. Who is this upstart Jesus who violates the law by working on the Sabbath as if God's healing works should not take place on the Sabbath. They say: "This man is not from God for he does not observe the Sabbath." No matter how much they blame and put down Jesus he keeps bouncing back as an important person of God.

At the end the now sighted man is blamed in a classic case of blaming the victim when he somewhat boldly upbraids the leaders. The interchange is interesting:

"They (the Pharisees) said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' He answered them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?' Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.'

"The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.'

"They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out." (26-34)

The Pharisees play the blame game pretty well. They eject everyone from the field but Jesus has the final word.

He says: "'I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains."

Jesus' "judgment" upholds justice. He states that those who blame are the "know it alls." They think they see it all, in other words, they think they are smarter, stronger, healthier, luckier, and have their lives more together than others. It's their way or the highway, typified by any form of fundamentalism in religion, politics or anything. Jesus says they are blind and estranged from God.

The blind, like the man in the story and all those who know their need of God, will be made well. The ideal church is a non-blaming community. Ours is a non-blaming church and when we come into this community – this Holy Communion – we can claim and feel the healing power of God for everything. Amen.