

WHO IS THE SINNER?
(John 9:1-41)

What is it about human nature that makes us so ready, willing, and eager to blame the victim? It might be simplistic smug self-righteousness: We're so good nothing bad could ever happen to us. But I suspect it's something deeper, some gut-level insecurity that needs reassurance: They got what they deserve and we were spared, so we must not be too bad.

I know, none of us would ever fall into the trap of blaming the victim. We're way too sophisticated to settle for simplistic answers that hold the injured party responsible.

But don't you know, the tsunami that hit Japan last month set off another round of finger pointing. Even Tokyo Governor Shintaro Ishihara said the tsunami was "tenbatsu," or divine punishment, for the wickedness of the Japanese people. I haven't heard anything from Pat Robertson, who usually chimes in when disaster strikes, but the Rev. David Yonggi Cho of South Korea's Yoido Full Gospel Church, which is the world's largest single congregation, didn't hesitate: "Because the Japanese people shun God in terms of their faith and follow idol worship, atheism, and materialism," he said, "it makes me wonder if this was not God's warning to them."

We would all like to think that the world makes sense, that life isn't arbitrary, that as Einstein said, "God does not play dice with the universe." We want to believe that we're not pawns in some great cosmic game of chance. Blaming the victim is one way of coping with what often feels pretty random.

I assume it's human nature because it goes way back. The Old Testament just assumes that bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people, that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. Human nature seems to be the only way to explain a notion that flies in the face of all the evidence. Look around, the fact is, too many bad things happen to good people, and too many good things happen to bad people.

Or maybe there's another explanation. John Milton in *Paradise Lost* prays to the Holy Spirit

What in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support;
That to the height of this great argument
I may assert eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.

In other words, Milton felt some need to defend God, to vindicate God, to absolve God of blame when bad things happen to good people. Because after all, a benevolent, all powerful God should make sure people only get what they deserve, nothing more and nothing less.

So maybe we're quick to blame the victim because otherwise we might have to blame God. And that would never do!

After Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, a state senator from Alabama said it hit Louisiana and Mississippi because they had legalized gambling and God was punishing them for their sin. A minister who heard this theory had a wonderful response, “Well, if the Lord was aiming for those casinos, then the Lord needs to aim better. The hurricane took out about eight casinos and nearly a hundred Methodist churches!”

I wonder if those wicked Methodists got the message and mended their ways?

When Jesus and his disciples encountered the blind man, the disciples’ first reaction wasn’t, “What can we do to help this poor fellow?” It was, “Who sinned, him or his parents?” As if it were up to them to judge and make sure the right person got blamed.

Jesus won’t get drawn into the blame game. For the disciples it’s a choice between the man himself or his parents. Jesus says, “Neither,” and spits on the ground, makes a little mud, and heals the man.

One obvious lesson we can take away from this story is that it’s better to help victims than get caught up in an endless and useless argument about who’s to blame. If Jesus had taken the bait, they might still be arguing – and the blind man would still be blind.

The blame game is based on a simple premise: someone must have sinned. But Jesus never played it. He didn’t play it here when it would have been easy to. He didn’t play it with the woman caught in adultery. He didn’t play it when he ate with tax collectors and prostitutes. He refuses to label anyone a sinner.

And then – irony of ironies! – who does get labeled a sinner? Jesus does! He heals this blind man and the religious leaders who are obsessed with the order of things, with right and wrong, sin and righteousness, conclude that he’s the sinner.

Can you see the humor in this story? The religious types who are so sure of their own goodness turn out to be warped in their own morality. They who are so certain that they can spot a sinner a mile away turn out to be blind to their own shortcomings. As Matthew Henry said in one of his commentaries, there are “none so blind as they that will not see.”

It turns out that the blind man, of all people, is the only one who can see who Jesus really is and where his power comes from.

We don’t much like to talk about sin because it does sound so judgmental. But it’s still a useful notion, especially during the season of Lent, when we’re reminded that we may be sinners, but God loves us and forgives us anyway. The only ones who condemn sinners are those self-righteous sorts who like to play God and point to sin in other people, who would rather sit around and argue about who sinned and who didn’t. If they’re so intent on finding sinners, all they need to do is look in a mirror. Martin Luther said we ought to confess our sins and throw a mantle of charity over the sins of others. That’s always good advice.

Talk about sin has tended to focus on things like drunkenness, sexual immorality, and sloth – not because the Bible comes down especially hard on them, but because those tend to be sins of the poor and marginalized. Middle

and upper class sorts could take some satisfaction in admitting that while they might not be perfect, at least they were better than those drunken, sexually impure, lazy people on the wrong side of town.

Let's not spend Lent theorizing about sin or looking to root out the sin of others. Instead, let's confess our own sin – the way we callously walk past those in need, the way we can always see the sin in others more clearly than in ourselves, the way we get confused into thinking that Jesus came as a judge and jury instead of a savior and healer. Lent should be a time for modesty and for celebrating a God who comes to us in love, despite our sin.