

BLAME, SHAME, AND BEING RECLAIMED

Scriptures: Matthew 3:1-17

A while back I saw a collection of statements that drivers wrote on accident reports to explain their collisions. Here are some samples:

- I collided with a stationary truck coming the other way.
- The indirect cause of the accident was a little guy in a small car with a big mouth.
- The guy was all over the road. I had to swerve several times before I hit him.
- I pulled away from the side of the road, glanced at my mother-in-law and headed over the embankment.

People will go to great lengths to blame someone else for their accidents: It's the other guy's fault. It's the little guy's fault. It is the fault of my mother-in-law.

Believe it or not, this is actually relevant to our scripture readings for today. In Jesus' time, as in our time, people were quite ready to blame others for their problems. If you had asked one of the Israelites in Jesus' time what is wrong with their country, they probably would have answered, "The Romans," or "The tax collectors," or maybe "The Samaritans."

This week I did some reading about the Pharisees and Sadducees who are mentioned in our first scripture reading. The Pharisees and Sadducees were political opposites, like conservatives and liberals. The Pharisees were the conservatives. They hated taxes, or at least tax collectors. They condemned the loose morals of their nation. They railed against permissive parents and people who did not keep the Sabbath and people who welcomed ethnic immigrants into the country, like the Samaritans. The Sadducees were the liberals. They were more comfortable with big government, so they got along with the Romans. The Pharisees accused them of being soft on crime, because they were less likely to invoke the death penalty. In general the Sadducees were more likely to accommodate to the values and fashions of the surrounding culture. They would have probably had more friends in Hollywood than the Pharisees, who believed in separation from the surrounding culture. They were like red states and blue states.

But the Pharisees and Sadducees had one thing in common: they blamed the problems in the country on others. The Pharisees blamed the Romans and the tax collectors and the Sadducees for going along with them. Sadducees blamed the zealots who wanted violent revolution, and the Pharisees who made it so difficult for Jews and the Romans to get along with each other.

But John the Baptist comes along and says, "The Romans are not the problem. The tax collectors are not the problem. The other guy is not the problem. You are the problem. All of you, Pharisees and Sadducees alike, need to repent. All of you need to change, before you are ready for the coming of God's kingdom."

You may not have realized this, but baptism is not mentioned anywhere in the Old Testament. Baptism was not practiced among the people of Israel in the Old Testament. It seems to have originated in the time between the Old and New Testament, and it seems to have been used particularly on Gentiles who wanted to become Jews. Before Gentiles could become Jews and enter the temple to worship God, they had to be purified, and baptism was the ritual that washed away their “uncleanness” so they could enter the presence of God.

But this is exactly what made John the Baptist so controversial. John came baptizing not just Gentiles but Jews. In essence John preached that it was not just Gentiles who needed cleansing, it was not just Gentiles who needed to have their sins washed away before they could enter God’s presence; it was also the Jews, even the Pharisees and Sadducees. It is not just the Romans who need to repent of their oppression. It is not just the tax collectors who need to repent of their dishonesty. It is not just the prostitutes who need to repent of their immorality, it is not just the atheists who need to repent of their godlessness. It is you—all of you.

Early the early 1900s the *London Times* asked a number of England’s most popular writers to submit an essay on the topic, “What is wrong with the world?” Today people don’t even wait to be asked. If you want to know what is wrong with the world, you can get an earful on talk radio. Everyone from Sean Hannity to Bill Moyers, everyone from Rush Limbaugh to Keith Olbermann is quite ready to tell you what is wrong with the world. But the best and shortest answer was given by a Christian writer of the time named G. K. Chesterton. In response to the question, “What is wrong with the world?” Chesterton wrote, “Dear sirs: I am. Sincerely yours, G. K. Chesterton.”

Now there is someone who understands today’s scripture reading. “You want to know what is wrong with this world,” John the Baptist says. “It’s not the Gentiles, it’s not the Romans, it’s not the Republicans or the Democrats, it’s not illegal immigrants or greedy corporate executives. You want to know what is wrong with this world,” John says. “It’s you. You are the people who must change before you will be ready for God’s kingdom.

In his book *People of the Lie*, Scott Peck writes,

Evil is not committed by people who feel uncertain about their righteousness, who question their own motives, who worry about betraying themselves. The evil in this world is committed by the spiritual fat cats, by the Pharisees of our own day, the self-righteous who think they are without sin.... Unpleasant though it may be, the sense of personal sin is precisely that which keeps our sin from getting out of hand. It is quite painful at times, but it is a very great blessing because it is our one and only effective safeguard against our own proclivity for evil (p. 72).

Do you see how important it is to hear this scripture passage, especially in our charged political climate where everyone is into blaming? John the Baptist replaces blame with shame, because a sense of shame, a sense of your own responsibility for the problems in the world and in your life, is the first step to being reclaimed.

If anyone feels no need to repent, if anyone thinks he or she is above needing to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, then the baptism of Jesus ought to take care of that. If Jesus felt a need to be baptized, what makes you think you don't?

Ah, but there is something more going on in Jesus' baptism. John himself is surprised that Jesus came for baptism. He says to Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" I guess that was a big topic in the Matthew class meeting last Sunday morning. Why did Jesus need to be baptized? Notice Jesus' reply, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." I can tell you there have been many attempts to explain what Jesus meant by that. Certainly by being baptized Jesus fully identified with us as sinful human beings. He literally got in the water with us. But for me the key is the phrase "all righteousness." Jesus was baptized not only for his righteousness but for all righteousness, in other words, for us.

These are the very first words of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew. With these words Jesus sets out on a journey that will ultimately lead to a cross. As he explains to his disciples at the last supper when hands them the cup, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus' sacrifice was not for his own sins but for ours. In the same way Jesus' baptism was not only for the sake of his own righteousness but for ours. He came to set right the whole world including us, if we are only humble enough to admit that we need it.

I do not think I am exaggerating if I say that most people in our world today confront their problems by blaming someone else. I do not think that is exaggerating. Most people in our world today confront their problems by blaming someone else. John the Baptist invites us to replace blame with shame, because shame—a sense of our own complicity in the problems of the world—is the first step in being reclaimed.

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