

A Sermon Preached at St. Christopher's Episcopal Church,  
Oak Park, IL on the Fourth Sunday in Lent,  
April 3, 2011 (Year A) by the Rev. Paris Coffey

*As Jesus walked along he saw a man who had been blind from birth. "Rabbi, whose sin caused this man's blindness," asked the disciples, "his own or his parents?"* John 9:1-2

Depending on your preferred news source, either the Obama or the Bush administration is to blame for rising gas costs.

Across the nation, some state representatives are blaming unions, mainly teachers, for the growing deficits their states must face.

Worldwide, in places hit with earthquakes, illness, and tsunamis it is nature that is blamed – or God.

While in North Africa, Gaddafi blames Libya's uprisings on a range of foreigners – al Qaeda, Egypt, the U.S., and if you ask Gaddafi's second son, even Canada. Canada may be a first in such fault-finding, unless you count *South Park*. This animated sitcom's authors wrote a song for *South Park's* movie version called "Blame Canada." The title seems absurd – as does the premise – which, of course, is just the point. On the other hand, its lyrics, although sometimes crude, are also quite insightful.

"Times have changed," the song begins. "Our kids are getting worse. They won't obey their parents. They just want to fart and curse! Should we blame the government? Or blame society? Or should we blame the images (they see) on TV? (No) no, blame Canada. Blame Canada!"

The song continues with several more such verses until it concludes with a mob of miffed parents vowing, "The smut we must stop. The trash we must bash. The laughter and fun must all be undone. We *must* blame them and cause a fuss . . . before somebody thinks of blaming us!"

I have to admit that I'm not really a fan of *South Park*, but were more honest sentiments than these ever expressed? I don't know, but I do know that this song understands that quintessential trait we all seem to have in which we don't just want to complain, but to assign blame in a way that holds anyone other than ourselves accountable.

As Calvin, of the cartoon series *Calvin and Hobbes*, concluded in at least one comic strip, "It's a lot more fun to blame things than to fix them." I say "at least" because Calvin is a *master* of choosing blame over change.

This was hardly the case, though, with Fanny Crosby – born in 1820 – whose eye became infected when she was six weeks old. Her regular doctor was out of town at the time, so an unschooled traveling doctor treated her by putting mustard packs on her eyes. Within days she was blind, and the medical novice blamed, although doctors today speculate that Fanny may have had congenital blindness that went unnoticed until this incident. Whatever the case, Fanny never blamed anyone. Indeed, quite the opposite, she vowed to rejoice in her condition, as she revealed in a poem she penned at the age of eight.

She wrote,      Oh, what a happy child I am,  
                  Although I cannot see.  
                  I am resolved that in this world,  
                  Contented I will be.  
                  How many blessings I enjoy  
                  That other people don't.  
                  To weep and sigh because I'm blind,  
                  I cannot and I won't!"

Fanny Crosby went on to publish four books of poetry and write over 8,000 hymns. She is one of history's most prolific hymnists – often called the "Queen of Gospel Song Writers."

Sadly, none of her hymns are in our *Hymnal 1982*, but *Lift Every Voice and Sing* has five. My favorite is "Blessed Assurance," while her most famous, "To God Be the Glory," is a close second. Certainly, her life gave glory to God for *ninety-five* years, and although her story may be exceptional, her celebration of life may well suggest the secret to longevity, and the power that comes with accepting life's challenges rather than assigning blame.

Granted, this is a tall order for humans who've grown comfortable assigning blame rather than owning our responsibility. At the same time, though, finger-pointing has its problems – distancing us from people and possibilities – as we see in today's Gospel where everyone except Jesus assigns blame to the man-born-blind. The disciples do it, the townspeople do it, the Pharisees do it, even the man's parents do it; and although blaming the victim for his or her own misfortune was a commonly-held belief then, it was and is truly bad theology. All of these "Godly" men and women distance themselves from the blind beggar, but the disciples – who've been with Jesus for three years and should know better – may be the worst.

Talking about the man as if he isn't there the disciples ask, "Master, whose sin caused this man's blindness, his own or his parents?" Their callousness is downright rude, exceeding a simple breach of etiquette. Even children know better, having been taught, "Don't point, don't stare, and certainly don't ask anyone what he or she did to deserve some particular challenge." Jesus' disciples, though, seem not to have had such upbringing, blurting out within earshot of the blind man, "Hey, Jesus, did God afflict this man because he's a low-down, rotten sinner or because his parents are?" It's a totally insensitive question, to which Jesus replies (all too mildly if you ask me), "You're asking the wrong question; you're looking for someone to blame rather than asking, 'How is the power of God at work in him?'"

This question is adapted from the *J.B. Phillip's New Testament Translation in Modern English* where Jesus says, "He was not born blind because of his own sin or that of his parents, but to show the power of God at work in him." It makes the meaning of this text a little clearer, since the NRSV – the translation in your leaflet – lets us distance ourselves from the story even more. In the *New Revised Standard* we're apt to hear that God has *caused* the man's blindness, which despite its *false* teaching, can keep us from hearing this story's real truth.

Sadly, such teaching has been around for a long time, despite its absurdity. Consequently, if you leave with nothing else today, please put away once and for all the paranoid theology that God is out to get us. God is after no such thing. Rather, God is out to love, heal, and strengthen us through *whatever* means God has; and this includes life's challenges.

Are we suffering from physical challenges? God will show us that well-being is possible even if we **don't** experience physical healing. Are we isolated? God can use our loneliness to draw us closer. Are we broken in any way? God will seek to show us that we're all in this together and that together we are stronger than alone.

At the same time, God can only do this with our own cooperation. When we're blaming others and distancing ourselves from sin – the places in **our** lives where we have missed the mark and with it missed the prize of God's abundance – we are lost. And yet all too often this is what we do, asserting that our problems are the fault of someone else, while those of others are deserved. We imagine that **we** are living successfully, but that "you" clearly are not. "You" – or someone in your lineage – is a sinner, as the disciples argue when they try to reduce the whole of a person to "sinner," as if they themselves are not.

What's more, it's what the townspeople and Pharisees do, insisting that the man-born-blind is a loser who needs to stay in the box in which they've put him. "He's a hopeless sinner whose sentence is justified," they judge, keeping him at a distance. After all, if he's not, what protection do **they** have against such vulnerability? Grace? Who wants that? You can hardly give grace away, since that's for losers who can't make it on their own. We've **earned our** success – our health, wealth, or position – which means that if the blind-man's condition changes without him earning it, we may have to rethink **everything**.

We may have to acquire a new world view, which is no small thing, since it means learning to see with God's eyes. It means seeing in a scruffy young shepherd like David from today's Old Testament reading, the promise of a king. It means seeing in a man-born-blind or woman blinded as a baby, a bold witness to God's grace at work in them. It means seeing in rising gas costs or growing deficits the prospect of a sacred summons to slow down and use more wisely what we have; or seeing in tsunamis and uprisings our great need to work together and with God.

In short, acquiring a new world view – a view that fits with God's – means flattening the boxes of our self-proclaimed success and lining up with so-called "losers" in partnership with God. After all, it's only then that our blind eyes will be opened; only then that light will penetrate the darkness that delights in blame, and keeps the world – AND us – from change. **Amen.**