

3rd Sunday after Pentecost Prpr 5 June 9, 2024 Blame and Forgiveness

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey St. Matthias Episcopal Church, Minocqua, WI

The full mug of hot coffee hit the floor, shattered into so many pieces and splashed scalding hot coffee everywhere: on the floor, the counter, and the white pants and pink sweater the person who dropped the coffee mug was wearing. It was literally a hot mess. What a way to begin a morning.

Without thinking, the person in the middle of this hot mess instantly responded by blaming someone who wasn't in the room or even the same house when it happened. That hot mess was someone else's fault. Her husband.

Some of us might be able to relate, others might laugh at this story that happened to researcher, author, and Episcopalian Brene Brown who uses it to illustrate how common blame is, and to warn how damaging blame can be to relationships. The rest of the story is: Brene was resentful her husband got home late the night before, so she did not get to sleep at her usual time, which meant she was tired the next morning, and about to have a second cup of coffee she probably would not have wanted or needed if her husband had got home on time, which is why it was his fault she was standing in her kitchen covered in coffee and surrounded by broken bits of a mug. It was her husband's misfortune he happened to call her at that moment. Their conversation did not last long because he hung up when she started to scold him for making her drop her full mug of coffee.

Brene Brown has done a lot of research on things like shame, blame, vulnerability, and emotions. I appreciate her work because she can explain and discuss issues like blame in ways that make them relatable and enlightening. Its important because as we saw in our first reading this morning from Genesis, blame has been with us since the very beginning, and we are still learning what it does to our relationships with each other, and with God, which is what the other readings we heard this morning are about.

According to Brene's research, blame is common because finding fault gives an illusion of being in control and displaces pain and discomfort, allowing us to feel better. The unfortunate consequence of blame is it is corrosive to relationships because it is the opposite of being vulnerable and accountable.

This definition fits with what we read in the portion of the Creation story where God confronted the first man and first woman about the fruit of the tree incident. Despite the popularity of St. Augustine's interpretation of this story that identifies eating the forbidden fruit as the origin of sin, there are many other theologians and scholars, some dating even farther back than Augustine who have a different interpretation. They point out the word sin does not appear until Cain took the life of his brother Able and interpret this story as being about the responsibility of having free will. This interpretation invites us to consider how our behaviors and choices and our relationships with each other connect to our relationship with God.

For example, God did not seem angry at the man and woman when God found them hiding in the cool of the evening. God's questions appeared to be attempts to have a conversation about choices, actions, and consequences. But to fully participate in that conversation, the man and woman would have had to accept responsibility for their actions, which they did not do. Instead, they blamed someone else. The woman blamed the snake. The man blamed the woman and worse, he blamed God for making the woman – something he did not ask for - in the first place. And just like that we're back in the kitchen with Brene Brown and the hot mess on the floor. This is where, it seems to me, God realized the man and woman did not appear to want or were not ready for a relationship with God, and could only blame God for their choices, because it was easier for them to put their pain and discomfort onto God than to accept responsibility for their actions and say they were sorry. Perhaps they were feeling bad for doing what they knew was wrong and experienced shame.

Shame, according to Brene Brown's research, that is an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and unworthy of love, belonging, and connection. When a person feels they are not worthy of love it can be difficult to convince them otherwise, and makes connections, relationships, and love difficult. Which can lead to blaming others.

When we view the creation story through this lens, we might recognize, by blaming God the man and woman were missing out on the opportunity to grow closer to God and each other, which might have happened if they had simply said they were sorry. So they grew away from God.

Some say the rest of the Bible is God's efforts to grow closer to people who insist on keeping God at arms' length, perhaps because people believe we are not worthy of God's love or forgiveness. While the Bible does include a few prophets like Abraham, Moses and Noah, who were close to God, there are many more who turn away from God, perhaps because they believed in the brokenness of humanity instead of belovedness.

I do not deny we human beings make poor choices, selfish choices, and use our free will to harm or get what we want without care or concern for how others are impacted. But this does not make all of humanity broken and unable to make different choices. Having free will means we *can* make different choices. Perhaps what needs repair, what can help us make those loving choices, is humanity's relationship with God, which is where the message of the Gospels comes in.

In today's Gospel we heard that repair of relationship happens through forgiveness. Jesus said God forgives our sins because God wants to be in relationship with us, God wants what we call family to be deeper than bloodlines, ancestry, traditions, or other things we have in common. This does not mean Jesus was diminishing the value of families, especially those who support and love each other and make room for others. When Jesus looked at the large crowd around him, the crowd we heard was so invasive they were pressing in on every side so that Jesus could not even eat, and said they were his mother, his brothers, his sisters, he was saying doing God's will – using our free will to choose God's will over our own – is participating in the family of God by accepting, receiving, and sharing God's love. If we learn in the creation story that blame corrodes relationships, then being vulnerable, being sorry when we do wrong and being willing to change, being open to learning, growing, letting go of fear, resentment, and the harmful idea that we are not worthy of love *is* being in relationship with God and can strengthen that relationship and relationships with others. Perhaps what Jesus was saying in today's Gospel about what is not forgivable had more to do with not accepting the spirit of God's love because of beliefs like humanity does not deserve love. Beliefs that reject God's love will only continue to corrode relationships, making growth and repair difficult.

One more thing from Brene Brown that might be of help today: in her book *Rising Strong*, she gives a powerful quote from her priest about forgiveness: "In order for forgiveness to happen, something has to die. If you make a choice to forgive, you have to face into the pain." While there are those who say the first man and woman were not forgiven in the creation story, I believe they were forgiven. Because it seemed to me God looked the pain of their blame in the face. The consequence of that blame was it hurt their relationship. For them to receive forgiveness, they would have had to look at the pain they caused and let the desire to pass that pain to someone else by blaming them die. Whether or not it is accepted and received, here we learn forgiveness does not mean pretending nothing happened. Forgiveness involves consequences for choices and actions.

The wonderful thing about God is it is never too late. While it may not be easy to resist blaming, we have the capacity to do so. Because we are loved, we were made in God's image, which is love, and a love Jesus revealed not only in his parables, healings, and teachings, but also on the cross as he died forgiving – not blaming – those who killed him, and was raised to new life that invites us all into delight in that love. We don't have to blame. We can choose another way.

When a full cup of coffee falls on the floor and makes a mess, we can help clean it up. Maybe it is an accident pointing out the need to be a little more careful for whatever reason, or maybe it indicates a deeper problem, one that can be worked on. Or maybe it is just an accident.

When we can respond to the incidents of life without blaming others, it can be incredibly liberating. It frees us to look a little more honestly at the dynamics or situation, can help us become more forgiving of ourselves and others, and might even reveal where God is, not over us accusing us, but with us, eager to grow closer to us, in accidents, incidents, and forgiving our mistakes, in the cool of an evening, the early morning, midday, afternoon, any time, any day, even this day.