

GETTING PAST BLAME

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Dr. Anne Gavin Ritchie on March 7, 2010,
the Third Sunday in Lent, based on Exodus 3:1-15 and St. Luke 13:1-9.*

Have you ever *blamed* someone? Blamed someone for moral or other deficiencies, which may have hurt you or someone else you care about? I *bet* you have. I certainly have! There's something perversely exhilarating about blaming other people.

For one thing, you get to feel right and righteous. This other poor idiot couldn't help but do damage to herself, himself and others. Putting someone else down allows us to feel up, far above the moral fray, innocent and blameless. Like angels floating in the sky.

Apparently that's what folks were up to in today's Gospel. The implication is that people had begun to blame the victims of Pilate's attack on the Temple. On a whim Pilate decided to have some Galilean pilgrims murdered. For his own amusement, I suppose. Their blood mixed with the blood of the animals they had ritually sacrificed. Why? Were these Galileans implicated in some revolutionary scheme? Had Pilate caught them out just in time? Probably not.

A harder question is posed by the other calamity, the falling of the Tower of Siloam, adjacent to the pool of Siloam. It's hard to think revolutionaries would be gathered there. Yet eighteen people died. Surely this couldn't be a completely random event. They must have done *something* wrong.

Jesus refuses to categorize or judge either group. After all, Pilate was notoriously brutal. He had ordered a group climbing Mt. Gerazim to be killed; he had seized Temple treasury funds to build an aqueduct. Pilate was a person without scruples. He didn't need a rational reason to harm others.

Jesus understood that sometimes tragedy strikes for no reason, like the recent earthquakes in Haiti, then Chile, and now Taiwan. Even so, people still long for someone to blame for misfortune.

Like a certain dump truck driver in a small California town. He struck a parked car while backing up. The owner of the car sued the city for damages. The catch? The driver of the dump truck and the owner of the car were the same person! The case was dismissed when the judge decided a person could not sue himself!

That's the problem with blaming. Blaming is a dead end. It tends to shut down possibilities instead of opening up creative solutions. The time and energy we take in condemning someone else takes time and energy away from finding a better way.

Taking *responsibility*, accepting the fact of my own humanness and the humanness of others, opens up new possibilities. I don't have to hate or fear people who have different opinions or different life experiences. I don't have to look down on anyone else to make myself feel better. I have an opportunity to reach out to others, to learn to work with them, to forge new partnerships.

We are honored to have as our speaker at today's Community Forum Fran Becker, who for 15 years has served as Executive Director of Carpenter's Shelter. Our own founding rector, Jim Green and many of our parishioners played a significant role in the development of this important Alexandria ministry.

It is tempting for some to blame residents of the Shelter for being there, for having no other options. People may want to dismiss them as having made bad choices, having brought misery on themselves. And some may have. But many come from an abusive home, or have been victimized by people they trusted. They

may have been told they had no worth, no future. Or they may have found themselves suddenly laid off from a job; in this economic climate it can be next to impossible to find another one.

In the end, it doesn't matter how or why people find their way to Carpenter's Shelter. Blaming doesn't help. It only matters what choices they make from now on. And it very much matters how the rest of us support them.

Jesus' parable about the fig tree is instructive. While it hasn't produced any fruit, the gardener intercedes for the tree; he wants it to have another chance. But the tree, like us, will not have all the time in the world. The point is made that there is urgency in responding to need and making our contribution. Our lives are fragile and our time is short. If we can make a difference, the time to do it is *now*.

Tonight some members of our parish will be serving dinner at Carpenter's Shelter. Every year we bring warm hats, mittens and gloves for the residents there. But there are other opportunities to for us to make a difference. What are the social policies and practices that keep some people at a permanent disadvantage? How can education, health care, and jobs be provided in a more meaningful and sustained way? This is the larger picture, and it cries out just as urgently for our attention.

The need of others can seem overwhelming. It certainly did to Moses, when God commanded him to leave the safety of the fields of Midian to go back to Egypt and free his people. Moses didn't want to leave his new family and comfortable life. In fact he found five reasons why he was not the person for the job. God did not accept Moses' excuses and sent him on his way.

What is *your* call? What is God calling out of the burning bush for *you* to do? Is it caring for an aging parent? Is it attending to needed changes in your professional life? Is it spending more time with your children? Serving meals at Carpenter's Shelter? Or working to change social structures? Only you can answer.

As you respond, your sense of call will strengthen. You will live free from the need to blame either others or yourself. Your time and energy will be channeled where there is the most need.

As we take responsibility for our own actions, that's when we sense the preciousness of life. That's when we realize that the ground on which we stand is *holy* ground, and that what we do for one another *matters*.