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Blaming Never Helps

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Text: John 9:1-41 “Man Born Blind”

Introduction

An Alcoholics Anonymous saying which I have come to treasure, especially when I am caught in difficult circumstances or when I want to find fault is “Blaming never helps”. This motto asks each person or group to take responsibility for their share of the problem...no more, no less! Just accept responsibility for that which belongs to you and allow others to do the same.

Blaming is so easy and usually externalizes the problem. In a recent debriefing session at the Alcoholism Recovery Home¹, men began to talk about what happened in their families over a weekend. They have changed and are changing while in recovery. But friends and family, not in counseling or a recovery program, remain much the same. Yet the men expect changes because they have changed.

As we talked some began to find fault with others – “Why can’t they see my changes?” “Why don’t others change, too?” I wondered whether this was blaming, getting rid of any personal responsibility, or throwing off consequences of past behaviour. Instead of accepting consequences or responsibility, we want to become Teflon persons. In discussion, some men could see themselves externalizing problems and throwing blame at others.

One man surprised me when he said, “I accepted all the blame for everything! Now I know it wasn’t all my fault but I felt like I was the cause of bad things in my family.” Another view of blaming, equally problem-

atic! We cannot accept all responsibility for problems, conflicts, and suffering in our families. Others were present, too.

Instead of blaming, how can we see the truth? How can we look more deeply, rather than accept easy answers to difficult problems?

Jesus Heals the Blind Man

Jesus healed a blind man on the Sabbath! There was immediate chaos and conflict in the synagogue, within the family, and among the religious leaders. Why were only a few rejoicing? Everyone knew that the man was blind and it was very obvious that he now could see. Who did this? And by what authority? The religious leaders even argue among themselves in the first half of the scripture about this miracle.

There are two interesting questions here: How do we explain suffering – and God's role in illness, pain, and suffering, and, How do we see Jesus and open ourselves to new revelation? Are we willing to change?

The man can see but doesn't know who healed him! The religious leaders do know who healed the man but are threatened by this good news. The parents and the blind man fear they will be excommunicated from the temple if they acknowledge who the healer is. Can you imagine that your pastor or church leaders would be so threatened that they would excommunicate you if you told the truth? Especially after a healing? Would you stand by your son/daughter when a miracle occurred? Or would you be most concerned about your own status? Would you question old ideas or would you stick to the tradition, even if it proved false or inadequate? It takes great courage to face the new – and to discern where God might be.

But why is a man born blind and what role does God play in the blindness and healing? This is a theodicy question, and it's a question which makes many of us search deeper to find God and to find answers to the tragedies and mysteries of life.

Several Contemporary Illustrations

#1. Rabbi Kushner says we ask the wrong question when we ask, "Why?" in response to tragedy. We will never find the answer to "Why?"

He says we must ask: "When a tragedy occurs, what shall I do and think? How am I going to proceed?" We can begin to know how to respond; we will never be able to fathom "Why?"

In my work, I have rarely found the answer to "why". I have found numerous ways to walk alongside, live through, or grapple with tragedy! I do not accept the tragedy as positive, but as something that I must live with and must walk alongside others.

I cannot answer a man's questions about "why" he has been born in a family where one or both his parents are addicted to alcohol or drugs. I cannot say "why" there are tragic deaths in families or "why" abuse occurs in many men's and women's lives who are in our recovery programs. But I can do something else, I can walk with them as they seek to understand how they now can live.

It's painful for me as I allow them to risk and it's painful for them as emotions, experiences, understanding, and questions of responsibility and consequences emerge. How do I explain "why" one man has HepC or HIV while others with the same experiences do not? How do I visit the graduate in the hospital suffering consequences of drinking? There is no explanation. But there is compassion and a listening, understanding ear, perhaps helping with relapse prevention.

This is part of Jesus' answer to the people asking "why?" He is not saying God causes blindness; he is saying that God is revealed in the healing. If we miss God in this healing, we are blind ourselves! The religious leaders said they could see God, but they do not see or they are sinful. They do not love, but try to keep tradition and their own power!

#2. I worked for several years with physically challenged people as we began the Independent Living Centre. I was called "Temporarily Able Bodied" or TAB. We designed programs in 1982-85 that helped individuals leave nursing homes, live by themselves, go back to school, and join the work force. Something new emerged!

But I remember sitting with committees where every one was trying to help the disabled and yet many were not open to Independent Living philosophy, which allowed physically challenged persons to direct their own care, live in their own apartments with personal support services, and serve on boards which provided their services. This was too much change too fast!

Sitting with two individuals who were in wheel chairs, I had to ask difficult questions and point out illustrations of many who were now much happier as they determined their own life style, took risks, and lived as adults. These individuals were not healed physically, but they were free and no longer captive. But others wanted them to be captive.

Today we have a home care system, better transportation system, independent living apartments, barrier free churches and buildings, and many other re-designed services. Physically challenged individuals are in the community, not in institutions. But 18 years ago, many of us were blind! Some leaders said they could see but acted for tradition and self preservation, not for the physically challenged! Would Jesus say they sinned?

#3. We have a tragedy today in our society that most citizens do not see. We have decreased unemployment and increased wealth accumulation (especially among the most affluent) while at the same time there is increased homelessness and dire poverty!

According to Ann Golden's report in Toronto and the Caledon report for Waterloo Region, the increase in homelessness and in individuals who are vulnerable to homelessness is not among the single men and women whom we have traditionally seen in our hostels and on the streets. The increase is in families with children. Currently 56% of the homeless in Toronto are mothers/fathers with children. 20% – or one out of five – children in Ontario are now poor (below the poverty line) and are often hungry.

The hostels in Toronto and Kitchener are beyond capacity, even though we are coping. We have fewer hostel residents who come from other parts of Canada to find good unskilled or semi-skills jobs. We have more men with mental and emotional illness who have been de-institutionalized and cannot find permanent, affordable housing.

There has not been any low income housing built in Ontario since 1995 and welfare rates (shelter allowances and income for living expenses) have been reduced. As a recent *Record* headline said, "The poor need to choose between rent and food." YWCA, Anselma House, House of Friendship and other agencies cannot find safe, affordable housing, so that the families and individuals can begin to re-establish themselves in a stable place. How does a mother create a stable home for her children without enough for food and rent? How does she provide clothing, shoes,

health and hygiene products, transportation, etc. for herself and her children?

But many of us are blind! We cannot see:

- Poverty is often hidden.
- The poor are afraid to talk about their struggles or to reveal their needs.
- It may not affect us in our families or among our neighbours.
- Political and media stereotypes obscure the tragic stories; they tell us we don't have enough money for poor people and the wealthy need more.
- We don't know how to make a difference – we feel immobilized.
- We are concerned about high taxes, governmental deficit reduction, etc.

Are we blind when we see stories about poverty or find economically vulnerable people in our own families, neighbourhoods, and churches?

But what does God feel, work for, and cry out for when the poor are observed, and children are not fed, or become homeless? Does God accept blindness? Does God want us to ask moral and ethical questions about poverty in the midst of increasing wealth? What do we do with our blindness? Is blindness an excuse allowing us to blame hungry children and their parents for our government's unwillingness to share the wealth?

Conclusion

I proposed that we constantly look for God's healing, justice, and spirit in our lives and our community. We are responsible to use our wealth, our knowledge, our power and influence, so that all in our community have health and wholeness. We cannot be like religious leaders and push God's Son and his followers out of the church and community. We cannot be like the man's parents who pretend they don't know because they are afraid. We need to be like the blind man and the followers of Jesus. "He can see! Jesus healed him!"

We stand with Christ who comes to us as we work with those who suffer and struggle; and in the midst of their healing and hope, we know that we might see – not only their healing, but see God. Let us not be blind to God's presence!

But if we say we see, and yet are blind to the needs of our neighbour – then Jesus says, “We sin!” Let us see and let us love!

Note

- ¹ A men’s residential treatment centre which is part of the House of Friendship, Kitchener, Ontario.