

Sermon: Fault

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Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

by Eric Anderson

In the second act of the 1989 musical *Into the Woods*, written by James Lapine with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, the main characters find themselves threatened by a force beyond their powers. The result is a series of accusations – musical accusations – from one character to another. Eventually, the group comes together, but this time to direct their fear and their anger at one character, the Wicked Witch.

In her powerful return song, “Last Midnight,” the Witch sings:

“No, of course what matters
Is the blame
Someone you can blame
Fine, if that's the thing you enjoy
Placing the blame
If that's the aim
Give me the blame—”

And that, it seems to me, parallels this encounter between Jesus, a man who can't see – and then can see – a group of bystanders, the man's parents, and various members of the religious leadership. Someone you can blame... someone to be at fault.

On the face of it, there doesn't seem to be a lot of fault to go around. This is a happy story. Mind you, my daughter Rebekah Anderson, an authority on Christian theology around disability, notes rather glumly that Jesus didn't ask the man before putting mud on his eyes. We all hope that this was John's omission rather than Jesus', that John simply left that part out. As she writes in a public Facebook post, “Because otherwise it just looks like Jesus and disciples saw a person, talked ABOUT him right in front of him, then spread mud on his face. Not cool.”

Let's not get distracted by figuring out who is to blame for that.

The man rather enthusiastically followed Jesus' instructions and returned to the place he'd met him, expecting to find him again. Those who knew him began to crowd around, aware that things had changed greatly for him, and creating enough of a hubbub that religious authorities

stepped in. I doubt that they were actually Pharisees – this took place in Jerusalem, where Sadducees were more common – but it doesn't matter. These were religious authorities rather like myself, only with powers to arrest, try, and convict.

Whereas the neighbors had been looking for explanations, the religious leaders started looking for fault. There was the issue of working on the Sabbath. The prohibition on Sabbath work, however, was not hard and fast. If a woman went into labor, they sent for the midwives, and those women worked. Things that preserved human life could be done on the Sabbath. The teachers debated whether that extended to things that provided healing.

That's why there wasn't unanimity among the leaders. Some were open to the idea that works of healing could be performed on the Sabbath. Others were not.

The more significant factor, however, was the fear and distrust of Jesus that ran through the religious leaders of Jerusalem. I imagine that each one had different reasons for their anxiety, but at the simplest, the situation in Jerusalem and Judea was a pot at a simmer. Add more heat – like a Galilean rabbi with a growing reputation, someone who received popular support as Messiah – well. The pot was going to boil over. Forty years after Jesus' resurrection, it did boil over.

They needed to prevent people from proclaiming Jesus as Messiah.

They needed to find fault.

Ironically, they started with the man who had been blind. I really enjoy the way that man reported his story to his neighbors, his family, and finally to these religious leaders. He gave them a straightforward narrative of events. He didn't speculate – at least not without a direct question. "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see." "I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see."

The only time he analyzed was when they asked him directly, "What do you say about him?" Only then did he reply, "He is a prophet" – a remarkable statement, and definitely troubling to religious leaders who tend to find prophets disruptive, but not the declaration of a Messiah that they feared the most. Still, it was too much. They proceeded to tell the man what the acceptable answer was: God gave the healing. Jesus was a sinner.

Fault.

They came up with the answer they wanted. Jesus was a sinner. That was the only thing that would be acceptable. The man wouldn't play their game. "Do you want to be his disciples?" he asked, with, I'm sure, a cheeky grin. And so the episode ended in a chorus of condemnation.

Fault.

Is it the nature of humanity to find fault? I suppose it might be. Identifying cause is a survival trait for human beings. For ancient peoples wandering a new landscape, keeping track of which plants made them feel sick, which plants fed them, which plants fostered healing – cause and effect – these were vital skills, literally skills that maintained life. We don't treat cause, however, in the same way as fault. Cause is a neutral term, it doesn't imply moral, ethical, or intellectual failure. Fault, however, is clearly directed by one person at another and suggests that the person at fault needs to do something about what they've messed up.

When we focus on fault, however, and especially when we decide who should be at fault in advance, we miss things. Those religious leaders did.

As Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "Most of the people who encounter Jesus are too busy seeing what they want to see — a magician, a heretic, a political and military leader, a carpenter's son, a wise man, a phony, a clerical threat — to notice what the blind man, free of all such filters, discerns by the end of the story. The blind man alone sees Jesus as the Son of Man and calls him, 'Lord.'"

Faith is often compared to something strong and sturdy. That may be true. What I don't want to compare faith to, however, is something rigid and inflexible. The Rev. John Robinson told the Pilgrims departing from the Netherlands in 1620 that he was confident "the Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy Word." The more fixed our picture of Jesus, our ideas about Jesus, our relationship with Jesus, the more likely it is that we are sliding away from Jesus.

The relationship of faith is like any other relationship in human life. It changes. It shifts. It grows.

Imagine trying to maintain exactly the same relationship over the years with a child. At some ages you have to change the relationship with a child every hour. Imagine trying to maintain exactly the same relationship over the years with a friend. It wouldn't work, would it? Or with a spouse?

Why would we do that with Jesus?

Why would do that with anyone?

Why would we prejudge someone to be at fault without questions and conversation about what had happened? Is it laziness? Does it satisfy our ego to be "right?" To go back to Debie Thomas, who writes, "'The place where we are right,' the poem says, is 'hard and trampled like a yard.' Hard and cynical. Hard and suspicious. Hard and stingy."

Is that the kind of person we want to be?

Is that the way we want to think about others?

Is that the way we want others to perceive us?

Cause and effect is a useful tool. It gets lights turned on and pressure washers running. It gets things accomplished in the world.

Fault is not a useful tool, at least not in the life of faith. It damages relationships. It obstructs insight. It doesn't get you breakfast.

Fault is worse when it is pre-determined. It's your fault. I'll figure out why later. Not only do human relationships suffer, so does truth, righteousness, and justice.

Let's let fault go. It didn't serve those religious leaders well two thousand years ago. Searching for fault, placing blame, they missed the greatest religious event of their time and of all time. They met Jesus and failed to perceive who he was.

Let's let fault go. It hasn't served us well. It's prevented us from understanding our own relationship with Jesus. It's damaged our relationships with family, friends, and neighbors. It's decreased the justice of our societies.

Let's let fault go.

Of course, if you don't... I guess that would be... your fault?

Amen.