

## "Don't Blame Me"

Psalm 119:1-12; Mathew 5:17-20

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus, Columbus

February 5, 2017 – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany – Rev. Ronald Botts

There was a popular song back in the 50's that still makes its way into the music of today. It was titled *Don't Blame Me* and one of the most successful renditions was by Nat King Cole.

Don't blame me for falling in love with you.  
I'm under your spell, but how can I help it?  
Don't blame me.

Well, love does chart its own course to an extent, but free will still plays a big part. We can decide whether we act on our feelings or put them aside. Sometimes we're "helpless" because we want to be and that becomes a rationale for letting our desires carry us along without accountability.

Now if you're in Washington these days you find "don't blame me" is a handy phrase and covers a whole lot of topics. It's a convenient way to get others off your back and to deflect criticism elsewhere.

Truthfully, though, most of us don't like to accept blame for what we do wrong. We don't even like to entertain the possibility that we might be at fault. It's unnerving and goes against our natural inclinations

Dorotheus, a 6<sup>th</sup> Century monk, identified the problem clearly even back then. He said, "The root of all disturbance, if one will go to its source, is that no one will blame himself." Or herself.

Our psalm reading for today speaks about this, only from the opposite point of view, when it starts out: "Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord. Happy are those who keep his decrees and seek him with their whole heart."

Now it's one thing to blame our actions on someone or something else and hope that we can get away with the deception. It's another matter to believe we're innocent of wrongdoing when we really aren't. If we're convinced that something isn't our fault, then we are conveniently absolved from responsibility. That's a more comfortable way to go through life, even if not true. Taken, to the extreme, it's a pathological response.

Even in matters of the heart, as in our old song today, that's just like us. "It's not my doing." "I can't help it." "It's entirely out of my hands." Have you ever noticed, we're not nearly so reluctant to take responsibility for something if we know that we are going to get a pat on the back. When criticism may be on the way, people distance themselves as quick as they can and deny everything.

I think we love to fool others, almost as much as we love to fool ourselves. One car salesman exonerated himself from the selling a lemon to a young college student by saying, "It's not my fault if she didn't ask the right questions. It should have been obvious to anyone that the car has problems. I just offered it and that's the one she chose."

The psalmist tells us, "Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord." But then we have to ask, just who are those blameless people he refers to? Could he be talking about us? The word **blameless** as it's used here is from a Hebrew word that means "upright." We misunderstand its intention if we assume blameless to mean "perfect" or "without fault." Indeed, if the psalmist calls us to be without sin, then that is beyond us. Well, certainly it is for me. On the other hand, I can strive to be an upright and moral person, and I can do things which make for that

That ancient scripture also ties *blameless* to the keeping of God's intention for us. "Happy are those who are blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord." Jesus, too, cites the importance of this in our Gospel text. "Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them... Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom."

I believe that a first step in being an upright person is by accepting blame where it's appropriate, and the beginning point of that is coming to see yourself, both for the good you do and for the not-so-good. Now, for the most part, we'd like to avoid this introspection. Not many of us look forward to thinking this deeply about ourselves. It's in our nature not to want to be reminded of our faults and shortcomings.

Without being aware of our sins, though, how are we going to do anything about them? You can't change | what you don't know or won't admit. Selective honesty won't do the trick either. We have to look at the whole of ourselves and not just the favorable parts of our choosing.

In taking stock of ourselves we also have to be careful not to go too far in the other direction. When we start looking at ourselves more closely, it's possible to arrive at a picture that shows us worse than we are. Everything about our life can start to look negative in self-examination, and it may seem that we have few redeeming qualities to our name.

The truth is that none of us are all bad, just as none of us are all good. We're a mixture of both, though we always have the potential to better ourselves. We need to understand what things require improvement, but we don't want to be trapped into thinking that change is hopeless because our faults seem endless. Hopelessness gives us a false excuse for not even trying.

Lucy and Linus in the cartoon strip *Peanuts* are talking. Linus shares his opinion that since Charlie Brown has been such a dedicated baseball manager he should be given a testimonial dinner. To which Lucy responds, "He isn't **that** deserving; how about a testimonial lunch?"

None of us are all good. None of us are all bad. We're somewhere there in the middle. Perhaps the bigger question is, "Which direction are we going? Are we striving toward betterment or are we adrift and sliding downhill?"

When true change seems most out of our grasp that's where Jesus becomes crucial in our life. He meets us where we are and says, "Come and follow me, and I will show you the way. Come, and follow me and I will set before you the person you are capable of being. Come and follow me, and I will give you the will and strength that you need."

Jesus saw the good, and the potential of good, in people just by looking at them. He saw it in vacillating, unreliable Simon (Peter) who was capable of becoming solid and dependable as rock. He saw it in the greedy, self-serving Zacchaeus who really desired to be generous and giving. He saw it in Mary Magdalene who came to him as a troubled and lost woman, but ready inside to flower and grow.

Jesus reached out to those caught in the morass of their own sins and assured them that transformation was possible. One thing they had to put aside was blaming others for their problems. They had to honestly confess their share of responsibility. They also couldn't submit to the temptation of regarding themselves as hopelessly bad, and therefore be excused from the possibility of doing better.

Lent will be coming up soon and it's a time when we're encouraged to do a moral inventory. Like millions of Christians before us we're urged to take stock of who we are and how we are. This is not something that we can do once and then it's done. Instead, we have to undertake this kind of spiritual check-up regularly. Just like a bush needs to be pruned back seasonally to allow for new growth, we also need to be rid of the dead stock that would choke out the future in us and all that's yet to be.

All of this is a reminder that we should be the best we can for our sake, but also for the influence we have on others. Here Jesus makes it clear that our calling is to be salt and light for the rest of the world. This was his work. This is **our** work.