

“Blame Game”
Genesis 3:1-15

The comic strip Family Circus has a running gag where something will be broken, all of the kids say “Not Me,” and an invisible kid labeled “Not Me” will be shown causing all sorts of trouble. In April 1975, Keane introduced an invisible gremlin named “Not Me”, who watches while the children try to shift blame for a misdeed by saying, “Not me.” Additional gremlins named “I know” (in September 1975), “Nobody,” “O. Yeah!,” and “Just B. Cause” were introduced in later years.

That’s what we see in the reading of the Fall into sin. No one takes responsibility. Everyone just passes the blame. The serpent tempts Eve by getting her to question God’s word. “Did God really say...?” Eve’s response adds to God’s word, saying that it’s not just the fruit they can’t eat, but they can’t touch the tree. The serpent continues to twist the words, and makes Adam and Eve want to be like God, and that they can be like God if they just eat of the fruit, and disobey God’s commands. “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired and to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate” (Genesis 3:6).

But then comes the blame. God comes and questions them, giving them a chance to take responsibility for what they’ve done. Instead, they try to hide. When that doesn’t work, they start passing the blame.

When he’s questioned by God, Adam manages to pass the blame onto both Eve and God. The man said, “The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I

ate.” Eve refuses to take responsibility, and just passes the blame onto the serpent. The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” The serpent doesn’t pass the blame, but the damage is done. As the saying goes, “If the devil made you do it, you blew it.”

Isn’t that so often how we handle these situations? We don’t take responsibility for ourselves. We just try to pass the blame onto others.

Politicians do this all of the time. Michael Douglas plays the title character in the film *The American President*. At the end of the movie, he gives a speech that shows how he’s changed, and what his opponent is trying to do. “We have serious problems to solve, and we need serious people to solve them. And whatever your particular problem is, I promise you [my opponent] is not the least bit interested in solving it. He is interested in two things, and two things only: making you afraid of it, and telling you who’s to blame for it. That, ladies and gentlemen, is how you win elections.” That’s not just true in the movies; it’s true in real life, as well.

We are all naturally wired to blame other people or circumstances when things go wrong. This is why when major workplace disasters are reported in the news, “human error” is often the first, and sometimes only, explanation provided, ignoring the systemic factors that led to the failure. It also feels the most satisfying. If someone else is to blame for our problems, then they need to change — not us. Blame helps us feel innocent, but only passes the guilt to someone else.

This leads to the second problem with blame — we don't notice how often we do it. Michael Timms, a leadership development consultant and author who works on team accountability writes, "Even the best executives I work with confess that they initially thought my "don't blame" message was important for their team members to hear, but not them. However, once they began tracking how often they blame other people or circumstances for problems, they were shocked at how frequently they caught themselves in the act."

While we all try to pass the blame like a hot potato, it eventually has to stop somewhere. We hope it doesn't stop with us, but all too often it does. And even if it doesn't, the hot potato of blame leaves us all with burned hands. Fortunately for us, the blame stops not with us, but with Jesus.

One of the more controversial plays in the Super Bowl a couple of weeks ago was a holding call on Philadelphia Eagles cornerback James Bradberry. The call allowed the Kansas City Chiefs to run out the clock, and win on a field goal in the closing seconds of the game. While Eagles fans were quick to blame the referees, that's not what Bradberry did. In the locker room after the game, he took responsibility. "It was a hold. I tugged his jersey. I was hoping they would let it slide." He didn't attack the refs. He didn't justify himself. He didn't argue that the call shouldn't have been made. "It was a hold."

So, instead of blaming their wrong actions on someone else, what should the man and woman, Adam and Eve, have done? They should have repented. They should have said they were sorry for what they did. And that's what we should do. Instead of blaming other

people for the wrong things we do, we should simply repent, tell God that we're sorry, and He'll forgive us because of what Jesus did for us.

That's how we should all respond when we get caught. We shouldn't try to blame the teacher who caught us cheating, the parent who caught us sneaking something we shouldn't have, the boss who caught us slacking at work, the cop who caught us speeding. We should take responsibility and ask for forgiveness.

Taking responsibility is hard, though, and we don't always do it. Fortunately for us, we can ultimately pass the blame. We pass it onto Jesus. In what Luther calls the Great Exchange, we pass the blame for what we've done wrong, the guilt for our sins, onto Jesus. Jesus, the one who was tempted in the wilderness by the devil, yet was without sin. Jesus, the one who is promised to crush the serpent's head, even as his heel is bruised. Jesus takes our sin upon himself on the cross, and gives us his righteousness. Our sin, our guilt, our blame is covered.

That forgiveness is what can halt the cycle of blame. Without forgiveness, we remain stuck to the people who we pass our blame to, and who pass their blame onto us. Instead, forgiveness stops the blame. Once forgiven, we no longer blame others or ourselves, but live as forgiven children of God.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center,
Ames, Iowa
February 26, 2023