

6 Epiphany Sermon
The Rev. Megan Dembi

If you've ever spent a lot of time with kids, you've probably noticed a less than ideal trait that'll often pop up—the tendency to blame others for their own wrongdoings. If you ask why Suzie hit Jimmy she'll claim it's Jimmy's fault because he called her a name. If you ask Kyle why he took Chelsea's notebook he'll say it was her fault since she was mean to him. If you ask Alex why she's playing with play dough when it's time to do math homework, she might say that Billy gave her the playdough...even though Billy has been sitting right next to you all day. Children often do not want to admit when they have done something wrong, and they certainly don't want to get in trouble. So when they get caught doing something they shouldn't be doing, it's not uncommon for them to try to avoid blame, often by trying to shift that blame onto someone else. And it's a child's parents and teachers who take on the responsibility of teaching their children that this is not the right thing to do—that a person should take responsibility for their own actions. This lesson often has to be reinforced in teenage years, when the idea that “everyone is doing it” becomes an excuse to do something that shouldn't be done or isn't responsible. Like when Cindy gets in trouble for skipping class but doesn't feel she should be punished because “everyone's doing it” or if Tim gets in trouble for drinking but doesn't feel like he did anything wrong because “everyone's doing it”. These are the kind of situations where adults try to make kids think critically about their decisions. The old line, “Well if everyone jumped off a cliff would you?” is often used in these kinds of circumstances. Parents and other responsible adults have to work to teach these lessons, because kids often blame others when they do something wrong. They do not take personal responsibility.

But the real problem is, that the tendency to try to blame others for one's own wrongdoing is not something that happens exclusively among kids and teens. Adults do it, too. Quite often, in fact. And we see this tendency to shift blame from the very beginning of the bible. When the serpent in the garden tempts Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, she gives into temptation and eats in. When Eve offers it to Adam, he does the same. When God learns of their transgressions and confronts them, the first thing they do is make excuses. Adam blames Eve for offering him the fruit. Eve blamed the serpent for making the fruit so tempting. Each of them had done wrong, yet all but the serpent tried to deny any personal responsibility.

Even though it may be concerning that we often never grow out of the desire to shift blame to others, it may not be terribly surprising. After all, being mature in some aspects of our lives does not mean we will be mature in ALL aspects of our lives. We see this in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. In it Paul compares the church in Corinth to infants. Though they are Christians, their faith has yet to become mature. Paul can see this by their tendency to take sides against one another based off of who they claim to follow. And because they have allowed these arbitrary divisions to cause conflict and blame. Though Christians in Corinth should all share allegiance to God above all else, they are allowing petty differences and using those differences to justify their wrong actions and not accept responsibility for them.

Yet as is true when Suzie hits Jimmy on the playground, or Tim drinks as a teen, or Adam eats the forbidden fruit, people are responsible for their own actions. Whether or not they try to shift blame onto others makes no difference. Though others may tempt us to do the wrong thing, we are the ones who ultimately make the decisions about how we are going to act. And whether or not we try to shift blame, there are consequences for our actions. We see this sentiment in the reading from Sirach. “If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.... Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses will be given.... God has not commanded anyone to be wicked, and he has not given anyone permission to sin.” Though we can blame our circumstances or other people when we do the wrong thing, we are not given a free

pass to deny personal responsibility or consequences for our actions.

Christ especially emphasizes this. Regardless of circumstances and temptations, Christ tells us to refrain from sin and follow God's commands. If you're wondering how strongly Christ emphasizes personal responsibility for one's actions, the answer is found in today's Gospel. "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell." Whatever circumstance we claim is causing us to sin, no matter what we might try to shift the blame to, Christ's message is clear. Even if it means having to cut off a hand or gauge out an eye, it is our responsibility, the responsibility of each and every one of us as individuals, to make sure we avoid sin and follow the commandments of God. Though Christ likely did not expect people would literally need to dismember themselves, this example makes his message abundantly clear—it is ultimately our responsibility and our responsibility alone to avoid those things that cause us to sin, not anyone else's. Because if we start blaming others for our own mistakes, we won't change for the better—we'll just continue to blame others.

Though this may seem like a simple concept, it can be difficult to actually live it. We see so many examples of people trying to shift blame for their mistakes and wrongdoings that it begins to feel normal to do it. A study done by Nathanael Fast and Larissa Tiedens a few years ago showed that "When people blame others for their mistakes, they learn less and perform worse. This problem is magnified when blame becomes embedded in the shared culture of groups and organizations."* It turns out that when we see others try to shift the blame for their mistakes, we become tempted to do the same. This effect is so strong that examples that don't even happen in our own lives affect us. People that read stories where the main character, fictional or real, blamed others for their mistakes were two times as likely to blame others when asked to write about a mistake in their own life. But just as we would be expected to do with any other temptation, we must also work to overcome the temptation to shift blame to others, even if "everyone is doing it."

If we don't accept responsibility for our wrongdoing, we won't change for the better. Why bother changing our behavior if we convince ourselves it wasn't our fault in the first place? If we try to convince ourselves that others are to blame for our mistakes, then we will not turn away from our sin and we will not follow the commands that Christ has given us. Just as we work to teach children and teens to take responsibility for their actions, we also must look at ourselves and make sure that we are doing the same in our own lives. We must recognize when others are shifting blame so that we will not be tempted to do the same. And above all we must identify those things which cause us to sin and make a conscious effort to avoid them. Because "If [we] choose, [we] can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of [our] own choice." Amen.

* Fast, Nathanael J. and Tiedens, Larissa Z. (2009). Blame contagion: The automatic transmission of self-serving attributions. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46 (2010), 97–106. Retrieved from http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~nathanaf/blame_contagion.pdf