

Yesterday a nonChristian Greenwich Village denizen said to me, "I've been to hundreds of funerals of gay friends & I've never heard anybody say anybody was guilty of anything. A number of times I've heard it said that Jesus dissociated himself from blame-throwers & punishers, but I've never heard anybody remark that in that story, Jesus did consider the woman guilty, did blame her: he said to her, 'Go and sin no more'."

His comment struck me especially hard because I'd just had a Cape Cod experience of being abused by abusers of that story, which scholars call *pericope de adultera* (a floating or independent but probably authentic Jesus-story about an adulteress; also called *pericope adulterae*).

I hope this Thinksheet will help you to avoid abusing, & make better use of, this rich, wondrous story of surface-&-soul sin & its misery, of guilt-blame-punishment, & of grace-mercy-renewal--a story, as Augustine put it, ending with two people, one embodying *miseria* (misery) and the other, *misericordia* (mercy, having a "heart" for others' "misery").

1 The local incident illustrates, by letters to the editor against me, how **the no-blame game** is played....Somebody's fault (not faultiness [none being naturally perfect]; fault centers in the self as having behaved culpably) creates guilt (as the self stands under God & in the presence of the community as, small or total, the human family). Bunyan's Pilgrim seeks an antidote for the guilt of his sin & finds it in the Cross. To affirm the moral-spiritual order & to call for the sinner's repentance, the community blames the debtor-trespasser.....Now look:

2 In #2615 (my June 3 letter referred to in the Sullivans' letter) I attacked our permissive culture's failed escape from the whole fault-guilt-sin-blame-repentance process through which (& this is one definition of forgiveness) God has provided in Jesus Christ the way of return (the image, in Hebrew, of "repentance") to communion with God & community with other human beings).

Now we have arrived at a public-medium abuse of this Thinksheet's scripture, & my reply published a week later:

### Columnist has no right to cast stones

In response to the June 3 letter, "Belief in fate cuts moral responsibility," two things immediately come to mind. First we could not believe Willis Elliott would write such an letter. Second, we cannot imagine why the Cape Cod Times would print it.

Mr. Elliott makes reference to Christian religion. We only hope he remembers that our religion teaches us that he who is without sin should cast the first stone. He

also makes the statement that "public schools do not teach faith in God," yet fails to recognize that many children are still taught about faith at home. We know that Monica Mullaly was taught about faith and what it means to love thy neighbor.

We would like to know who appointed Mr. Elliott judge and jury and gave him the right to place blame on anyone.

PAULA and PETER SULLIVAN  
11 June 93 Centerville

### The line between blame, punishment

America has become so sentimental, so falsely compassionate, that nobody seems to be to blame anymore.

In my June 3 letter, I named somebody as to blame for something. A letter printed in response June 11 doesn't say that person wasn't to blame but does say I am for saying that person was to blame. Jesus is the authority alleged against me: "He who is without sin should cast the first stone."

Say the letter-writers, "We would like to know who appointed Mr. Elliott judge and jury and gave him the right to place blame on anyone." The implication is that nobody did, but the fact is that Jesus did, in the same Gospel story the letter-writers refer to.

The story is in the Gospel of John, 8:2-11. Jesus blames a woman for committing adultery and says, "do not sin again." Jesus in the story does not intervene between event and blame, but between blame and punishment. My letter was about blame, not punishment. The person in question should not be punished.

12 June 93 WILLIS ELLIOTT  
Craigville

In saying "Jesus does not intervene between event and blame," I have stated precisely what the Cape Cod community massively did when one teener's bad driving killed another teener. Overwhelmingly, the community blamed "fate"--a **double failure**, two avoidances: (1) Here playing the no-blame game, which evades reality even more than does the blame game, the community refused to face

its moral-spiritual obligation to the plain fact that the driver was to blame (meaning, actively, "to be blamed," at least by silence). Reality, the moral order of the universe & of society, would not have been offended by saying to the driver, "I'm so sorry." But people were gushing out things like "It wasn't your fault" & "It could have happened to anybody"! It was as though the community were at war with reality, including the driver's own conscience.... That first avoidance was a moral-spiritual failure. The second (2) was a religious-theological one: Biblical resources, Jewish & Christian, for dealing with fault-guilt-sin were not exploited for the driver's, & the community's, enlightenment & action. True repentance includes amendment of life: does the driver's life need amendment? the community's? If the event were realistically-honestly faced, some changes might occur. Eg, what are we to think of the highschool's sponsoring an event (in this case, the junior-class prom) in which the custom is for the kids to stay out all night whatever their parents think of it (in this case, the driver was to have returned home six hours before the "accident" occurred)?

Such considerations bring up another dimension of blame in this case: while the driver was *entirely* to blame as the causer of the death, she was not *exclusively* to blame: for years this community has tolerated that all-night sleepless binge, a setup for horrors to happen, especially given the immature judgment of the kids (the driver was standard-junior-class age).

3 Now let's hear from one of those kids, a classmate of the driver:

I compliment the writer on her caring & congratulate her for her public-spiritedness in sending this letter to the editor (& am sending her #2615 & this #), but she's mislocated the twister, as this unpublished letter of mine to the editor explains:

"Purely accidental" is a name for a particular event which could have been given other names. The function of this name is to relieve of responsibility by shutting off the search for meaning and wisdom.

"In a letter today (16 June 93), a Barnstable High School junior calls Sean Breen's death 'purely accidental.' Can anything be learned from something so named? Of course not. Such an event is nonsense, non-sense, 'just

## Students defy twisted view of accident

I am puzzled as to what Willis Elliott (letter, June 3) was trying to accomplish by blaming Monica Mullaly for the purely accidental death of Sean Breen. The frustration and anger that inevitably follow such a tragic event could only be magnified by such a cruel letter. If Mr. Elliott followed the Christian teaching to which he referred, he would not have tried to assume the place of God and pass an undeserved judgment on Monica.

Being a junior at Barnstable High School, I was present at the somber assemblies that were held the morning of May 17. If Mr. Elliott had witnessed the outpouring of support for Monica that came from everyone (including Sean's closest friends), perhaps his twisted view of this tragic accident might have been straightened.

MARISA HEDLUND  
Hyannis  
16 June 93

one of those things.' For example, it could not be learned that teens staying out all night is not a good idea, even on prom night.

"The letter-writer is guilty of what she accuses me of, namely, a 'twisted view' of the accident. It twists both logic and morality to assert that a driver causing a death is blameless.

"Compassion toward the driver is appropriate. Sentimental exculpation is not.

"In this light, I hope the writer, who is 'puzzled' by it, will re-read my June 3 letter.

"We are--all of us, and always--responsible for the names we give to what comes at us in our private and public living, locally and in the larger world. For those names announce how we see things, and forecast how we shall live. To deny that responsibility is 'to assume the place of God,' who makes us responsible and calls us to account."

4. The **church** is not blameless for the public's unbiblical & antibiblical no-

tions about fault-guilt-sin-blame. The Catholic tradition tends to trivialize guilt by quasi-magical sacramental removal of it (indulgences, which Luther attacked, being only a logical extension): American mainline Protestantism downplays it. Today's "Doonesbury" cartoon pans the latter. A pastor, who has started a church for a fistful of nontheological factors & come-ons, is trying to persuade a couple to join his "Little Church of Walden." Says the husband, "What's your basic approach here, reverend? Is it traditional gospel?" Rev's response: "In a way. I like to describe it as 12-step Christianity. Basically, I believe that we are all recovering sinners. My ministry is about overcoming denial, it's about recommitment, about redemption. It's all in the brochure there." Wife: "Wait a minute--sinners? Redemption? Doesn't all that imply...guilt?" Rev: "Well, yes, I do rely on the occasional disincentive to keep the flock from going astray. Guilt's part of that!" Husband: "I dunno. There's so much negativity in the world as it is." Wife: "That's right. We're looking for a church that's supportive, a place where we can feel good about ourselves. I'm not sure the guilt thing works for us." Husband: "On the other hand, you **do** offer racketball." Wife: "So did the Unitarians, honey. Let's shop around some more." .... Preaching from an unexpected pulpit!

**Guilt** is an embarrassment--worse, an insult--to the ego. "Amazing grace" is for "a wretch like me." Islam is easier to spread than Christianity, which calls on all to repent, which is harder than merely to submit ("Islam"=[Arabic] "submission"). The two different acts produce two distinct & competing shapes of soul, & these two shapes will be the major global confrontation now that the Cold War is dead.

5 The third line of this Thinksheet's title--"J. says **everybody's guilty**"--is the diametrical of the popular misunderstanding of this pericope, which is that Jesus' love is unconditional, nonjudgmental. How come this reversal of meaning? A few clues:

(1) Indirectly, he **blocks** her punishment. The popular reasoning: (a) The guilty should be punished. (b) He's against her being punished. (c) So it must be that he thought her not guilty. One reason the pericope had trouble getting into canon (ie, the NT) was that some Fathers thought the story immoral (seeming to condone a sin of the flesh) & antisocial (anarchy ensuing in the absence of punishment for antisocial behavior). In a 27 June 93 editorial in GREENWICH TIME, Greenwich, Conn., the managing editor, after detailing America's pathetically simple-minded idea that the answer to all problems is education, says this: "If education isn't getting the message across [& it isn't], some serious retribution might help." That would be a wrenching change, for liberal educational theory's "positive reinforcement" was supposed to displace & replace retribution's negative reinforcement (didn't B.F. Skinner say it would?). How difficult it would be to add negative to positive reinforcement appears even in that editorial's choice of "retribution" (which means both reward & punishment) to mean "punishment." That's how dirty the "p" word has become.

It's comforting, though a false comfort, for the anti-punishment intelligentsia to have dominical support from our floater pericope, albeit abused. This finds reinforcement in the educationist self-image as sage: Jesus as wise one is French: "To know all is to forgive all" (so, the sanction bites, if you're unforgiving in any instance, you're ignorant).

(2) He himself does **not condemn** her (v.11, κατακρίν- *katakrin*- to pass, & execute, sentence on; the n., ending in -μα *-ma*, the resultant suffix, means the result of the condemnation, ie the punishment, the doom). Her accusers had condemned her in agreeing with the sentence passed on her; but because Jesus intervened between that verbal condemnation & its acting out, the previous vs. could say that they had not condemned (meaning, here, executed) her (same vb.)....In this compound verb, the intensive-pejorative prefix is added to the simple vb. meaning to judge (as, twice, Mt.7.1, the Sermon on the Mount proscription of the censorious-judgmental spirit). The distinction between the two vbs. is a frequent word-play in early Christian literature because of Jesus' character & action.

6 In our story, Jesus **blames** (ie, gives the verdict, guilty) but does not **condemn** (ie, pass/execute sentence). He intervenes between *krin-* & *KATAkrin-* by inducing the accusers to judge-blame-condemn (first sense: pass judgment on) themselves. Generalizing from the scene, we can say that indirectly Jesus says everybody's guilty.

See the psalmic dream fulfilled: justice & mercy kiss each other. Jesus honors justice, blaming the sinner, not condoning the sin; and mercy, forgiving the sinner, whose penitence and fruit of repentance (viz, righteous living) the pericope implies. (In his great commentary, Raymond E. Brown translates, "avoid this sin.") (For this hard/soft, severity/kindness, in God, see Ro.11.22.)

The story would not have survived had it not accurately transported the remembered Jesus, who was shockingly both strict-rigoristic & latitudinarian in his living & teaching. Look at a list of the parables & ask yourself how you think the first audience thought each would end; then reflect on how each *did* end! Then do the same with his deeds, noting their inconsistency with worldly motives & expectations & their utter consistency with his vision & character & verbal message. Says he, "you judge by human standards" (NRSV; mg, "according to the flesh"; 4 vv. after the pericope, & perhaps the reason this story got stuck into this Gospel at this point). Far from making light of sin, in the pericope he treats it as more serious & more pervasive than do the adulteress' would-be killers. And while he says (same vs., 15) "I judge no one," his very existence was both the judgment & the proffered forgiveness. And he refused to be impaled on either horn of the dilemma his enemies sought to trap him onto--offending the secular authority by approving an illegal execution, or being discredited in pious eyes if he merely interfered with the execution of a Torah injunction.

Finally, that old chestnut as to why Jesus wrote on the ground. I'm blessed by the pious conjectures, but I think he was biding time to sweat out what to say. The answers did not come easy for him. They were one dimension of his suffering. And mine. And yours. The Redeemer's grace was, & is, not cheap.