

# Transfer of Ownership

John 5:1-18

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Pentecost

13 June 2010

One day, a cowboy was riding along a cattle track in Arizona. As he came round a bend he saw a native Indian lying down in the middle of the trail with his ear pressed to the ground. As he came closer the man began to speak. "Wagon," he said, "drawn by two horses. Horses both dapple gray. Passengers in wagon. Two passengers. One man, one woman. Man driving. Going very fast."

The cowboy was amazed. "That's incredible," he said, "I can't believe it! You can tell all that just by listening with your ear to the ground?" The Indian replied, "No, I can tell all that because the wagon ran over me half an hour ago!"<sup>1</sup>

Isn't that the way it is so often in our lives? Something comes along and runs us over, leaves us lying on the ground, crushed and trampled. Maybe a financial loss, or a medical condition, or a failed relationship, or an accident. Something comes along that knocks us off our feet and sends us staggering through life.

Seemingly, this is what happened to the man who was lying close to the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem, among the great crowd of sick, lame and paralysed people who frequented that place. It looks like he had been run over and flattened by something that had happened to him in earlier life. Maybe it was a birth deformity or injury from an accident. Whatever it was, he had lain there beside the pool, renowned for its therapeutic waters, for 38 long years. And he had never been healed.

Now, we might feel sorry for this man and justly so. But, reading between the lines, I think he relished people feeling sorry for him. He revelled in being helpless and hapless. He gloried in being a victim. The words "Poor you! Poor fellow!" rang like music in his ears.

Consequently, he enjoyed blaming others for his misfortunes. When Jesus asked him if he wanted to get well, he replied pitifully, "Sir, I don't have anyone to put me in the pool when the water is stirred up. While I am trying to get in, somebody else gets there first."

Then, later, he shifted the blame again. After Jesus had told him to get up and walk, the Jewish authorities came down on him for breaking the Sabbath by carrying his mat. And, rather than take personal responsibility, who does he blame but the very person who healed him? "The man who made me well," he said, "he told me to pick up my mat and walk ... It had nothing to do with me. It was him over there. He made me do it."<sup>2</sup>

Talking about offloading responsibility, if the whole matter of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico wasn't such a tragedy, it would be rather amusing to see

how all the parties involved are blaming each other. Minimising their personal liability. Transferring ownership of the problem to others. Convincing everyone they are the ones doing the right thing and that it's everyone else who is at fault. They are all covering their ... Oh, how can I put it delicately in a way fit for pure, pristine Presbyterian ears? ... They are shielding their derrières, let's say!

BP, for its part, has not only been at pains to understate the amount of oil that has been released and the environmental damage caused. They have also found time to launch a multi-million dollar damage-limitation public relations campaign, as well as ensuring that everyone knows that the real fault lies with the Transocean company who built the rig and drilled the well.

Obama, on the other hand, scared by shadows of the Bush administration's failing in their handling of Katrina, has mounted his blame game in a similarly unseemly way. He and his staff have resorted to overly aggressive, politically-motivated rhetoric with contrived outbursts of anger and ill-chosen expressions, like "keeping the foot on the neck of BP", "wanting to know whose rear-end to kick" and personal attacks on the BP CEO, saying that he would fire him if he could.

Now, BP certainly needs to take responsibility for its shortcomings in this whole crisis. But before the entire blame is offloaded on to its shoulders, the US administration and the US public, if not the western world, needs to remember that we all, in a very real way, must share the blame for what has happened in the Gulf. Why is there such a vast number of oil wells being drilled there in the first place? Because US administrations, Canadian political leaders, among so many others, have constantly been telling us that we have to lessen our dependence on middle eastern oil so that, in politically critical times, the West cannot be held hostage.

Then, looking at the whole matter in an even wider perspective, why is there the immense pressure on oil companies such as BP Shell, Amoco, Chevron, Conoco-Phillips, and so many others, to deliver oil in vast quantities and take risks in so doing? Because we in the Western world – that's you and me – have such a great addiction to oil. We constantly need more and more oil to run our cars, to fuel our travel, to heat our homes and our businesses. We just can't get enough of that black/brown viscous liquid. Our thirst is unquenchable.

So, where the Gulf oil spill is concerned, rather than the various parties indulging in the blame game, in

scapegoating, in transferring ownership of the crisis to others, in minimising personal liability, we need to realise that we all share in the blame for what has happened there. We all bear part of the responsibility and have a duty to help put it right. Not that we might be able, personally, to do much in the short term in providing ideas how to stem the flow of the leak or go down there to help with the clean-up. But, in the longer term, we the people of the Western countries have to lessen our dependence on oil and demand that our governments take the lead in promoting more environmentally-friendly energy technologies. And to do this as a matter of great urgency.

Isn't it a pity that so often when something goes wrong in our society these days, we are not so much worried about finding solutions as singling out someone to bear responsibility. Heads must roll, we shout. Someone must have done something wrong. Root that person out. Make an example of them. Name them. Shame them. Fire them. That'll solve the problem once and for all.

And the same happens in our daily lives with other people. If something annoys us or frustrates us or doesn't go our way, then our instinct is to blame it on others and make sure others understand that, whoever was responsible, it wasn't me. "Couldn't have been me. Must have been him. Although it could have been her. Or, quite possibly, them. As for me, didn't see it. Didn't do it. Can't believe it. Know nothing about it. Left before it. Arrived after it. But if I hear anything, I'll let you know."<sup>3</sup>

But rather than blame that hapless fellow employee at our work who always seems to get things wrong, let's see how we might just be part of his problem, contributing to the feelings of low self-esteem that undermine his self-confidence. Or, rather than heap all the blame on a husband, wife or partner or family member who constantly antagonises us, let's see how as members of the same family system, we share in the problem and therefore have a duty of healing and reconciliation.

It's amazing, of course, that when we do stop blaming others and take responsibility for putting a problem right, how often it can make such a difference in a given situation. And this because our ownership of the problem then opens us up to receive help that we might not previously have known was available.

Eminent 20<sup>th</sup> century psychologist, Dr. Carl Rogers, once said that he considered that the most hopeless task in psychotherapy was counselling those who blamed others for their problems. "If," he said "you take ownership of the mess you are in, help is available for you. But to the degree you continue to blame others, you will be a victim for the rest of your life."<sup>4</sup>

Rev. Bruce Larson, for many years a colleague of

Robert Schuller's at the Crystal Cathedral, and author of many popular Christian books, once told how he went for a medical, fully expecting to be castigated for being over-weight. He had all his excuses ready and a list of those to blame for his weight problems including his wife's cooking and people who invited him to so many church dinners.

When the doctor had finished probing and poking, he took off his glasses and looked at him across the desk. "Tell me, Mr. Larson, how do you feel about your weight?" Larson said he was thinking: How did I feel about my weight? What kind of ridiculous question was that? I was prepared to have him tell me how he felt about my weight. That would make my weight his problem. In response to which I could employ all the means of resistance I had mastered across the years. But now he wanted to know how I felt. To my amazement, I found myself, for the first time in years, honestly confronting the fact that I was overweight, telling him what weight I felt I should be and that I had to do something about it. "Excellent," he said. "now I think I can help you with your problem."<sup>5</sup>

When we stop blaming others and take ownership of the problems in our lives, suddenly things begin to change. Help becomes available that wasn't there before. Help from resources within ourselves. Help from other people.

Not only that. When we stop blaming others and take responsibility, help becomes available from a higher source. Look how things changed for the man beside the Pool at Bethesda when he reacted positively to Jesus. Look how he was able to get up and get going, once he assumed ownership of his problems by admitting he really wanted to get well.

When we do the same. When we get out of the blame game and assume ownership of our problems, what a liberating experience, what a moment of empowerment. It's just as if God, like that doctor, was saying to us, "Excellent! Now I think I can help you with your problem."

© George A. Turner  
St. Paul's Presbyterian Church  
Peterborough, Ontario

---

<sup>1</sup> Maxie Dunnam, "The Wholeness Question: Do You Want To Be Made Well?" [www.eSermons.com](http://www.eSermons.com)

<sup>2</sup> John 5:1-18

<sup>3</sup> William Ritter, "So, Whose To Blame Here?", [www.eSermons.com](http://www.eSermons.com)

<sup>4</sup> William Ritter, "When we Run Out Of People To Blame", [www.eSermons.com](http://www.eSermons.com)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, adapted.