

Another View of the Blame Game

Last week I read an email from Gail, a woman in Australia, who compared America's relationship with President Bush to battered wife syndrome. She talked about the way he lies to us and we let him get away with it. She brought up the reality that he's driven our friends away by his policies and we don't call him to account.

Gail said that her letter was a long distance intervention. She said she couldn't stay quiet any longer after seeing the devastation of Katrina and especially the incredible governmental incompetence in the aftermath on the Gulf Coast. She said we're an interesting, beautiful, creative country and that our friends will come back and we'll find a much better leader if we just throw George out.

How I wish I could sit down and talk with Gail. The horror of what's happening in our country that she so creatively outlines as battered wife syndrome hasn't been missed by all of us – in fact, a lot of us know that we've turned down a road that will end in our destruction.

Unfortunately, as bad as George is, the problem is really worse than having him as our president. We are the problem. We cannot cope with the truth that we are not living up to our own ideals. We cannot believe that we are no longer a beacon of hope for suffering people around the world. We are the most wealthy and powerful nation in the world and we believe everyone wants to be like us. We cannot allow ourselves to see anything that contradicts our long held, cherished perceptions of ourselves.

To use Gail's analogy, the rich woman would rather stay with the abusive husband than risk losing the house, the cars, the clothes, the country club membership, the frequent flyer miles,

the health insurance, her part of the investments. The rich woman would rather stay with the abusive husband than risk being exposed as “just another battered wife.” We aren’t “just like everyone else.” We’re the country that won WWII, we’re the winner of the Cold War, we’re the sole surviving superpower, we’re America.

Even those of us who have never heard of John Winthrop, first governor of Massachusetts, have internalized part of the basic idea of his sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity.” He wrote and delivered this sermon while he was still on the ship, the *Arabella*, bound for North America to set up New England with the Massachusetts Bay Company in 1630. He said that we would be “a city set on a hill,” that our government would be copied by nations around the world. “We shall find that the God of Israel shall be among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, ‘the Lord make it like that of New England.’”

We believe we are special in some fundamental way that makes us superior to other nations. And even in the face of so much evidence to the contrary, we cannot allow ourselves to see what’s right in front of our faces.

But Winthrop also issued a warning: “The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world.”

We have shifted from working on behalf of God (building the city set on a hill) to thinking we are God. We are drunk on power. We have been so successful that we believe we can control everyone and everything – and that we have the right to do so.

What is scariest for me right now is not George, but the realization that God seems to be withdrawing "His present help from us" to use Winthrop's words. It seems that this blindness and deafness about the truth that we are experiencing is not just the "normal" denial of a battered woman. This is spiritual blindness and deafness that the One who really is in power has allowed to overtake us.

It's eerie for those of us who can see and hear at least a little bit. It's like walking through the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel, desperately calling out to our brothers and sisters to wake up, but not hearing the rattle of bones coming together or seeing the flesh being reformed on the skeletons. What is it going to take? How many disastrous wake up calls must we endure?

One initial idea might be to admit that we are drunk on power and that we cannot free ourselves. "We admit that we are powerless over our desire to play God and that our lives have become unmanageable." Many Americans know these words, slightly altered, from Step One of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Can we admit we are powerless over our desire to run the world, which we cloak in the rhetoric of taking democracy to oppressed people in other countries (however, only oppressed people in countries rich in oil)?

This isn't about red states or blue states, liberals or conservative. This isn't even about all the moral issues we love to polarize ourselves around. This is about the fundamental way we live in the world. We're on our way to being a byword (a person or thing proverbial as being contemptible or ridiculous, Webster) throughout the world.

Will Christian church leaders call our people to turn around? To trust Jesus, not just for our eternity, but also for today and tomorrow? Will we lead them through the chaos of genuine change,

even if that change doesn't lead directly to the Promised Land, but must go through the wilderness first?

Biblically, the measure of a nation is how it treats the stranger, the widow and the orphan. The video tape from the Gulf Coast shows that we have been weighed in the balance and been found wanting.

As Christians we need to work side by side with our Atheist, Muslim and Hindu neighbors to rebuild the infrastructure of this nation. We need to be genuine partners, not paternalistic overlords who always get the last word because we hold the money. THEN we will have a credible Christian witness when someone asks us about the reason for the hope that is in us.