

April 5, 2009, FCMF # 1

John 11:45-53 and Leviticus 16: 20-22

“No More Scapegoats!”

'And the Goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a Land not inhabited.' (Leviticus 16: 22) This painting entitled, "The Scapegoat," was painted in 1856 by William Holman Hunt. It was the only painted image depicting the events described in the Book of Leviticus, that I could find on the internet. Hunt painted it during his first trip to the Holy Land, choosing for the landscape one of the most desolate in the world along the shores of the Dead Sea. Two verses are inscribed on the frame, one is Leviticus 16:22 which I just read and the other is Isaiah 53: 4, 'Surely he hath borne our Grievs, and carried our Sorrows/Yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of GOD, and afflicted.' This passage in Isaiah is a messianic prediction, part of a Messianic tradition dedicated to what is called the "Suffering Servant Messiah." This Messiah will save the world through sacrificial love. But before I begin, here's another more modern expression of the scapegoat (cartoon- "executive assistant" is new term for scapegoat!)

Leviticus 16 recounts for us in great detail a ritual process where two goats are selected for sacrificial death. Once the priest has ritually bathed and is appropriately dressed, he would then slaughter one of the goats,

flinging its blood around the temple to consecrate himself. The second goat was the “scape goat” and he was to be lead or chased from the temple into the wilderness carrying with him the sins of the entire community. Two deaths, one immediate and the other slow in a harsh and empty place.

As we discussed last week ritual sacrifices played a critical role in all ancient societies. These rituals also make us uneasy readers, especially the OT text since they offend our modern sentiments. I also made you all work a bit last week as I tried to introduce the theories of the French born literary critic and philosopher Rene Girard. First let me thank you for being such good sports. Secondly, before I go on, with his interpretations of Jesus’ life and death let me review briefly some of the points raised last week:

Rene Girard studied Violence and Religion in Primitive Cultures.

Humans behave on natural, hidden impulses called “mimetic desires.” Or the desire be like another. This desire eventually leads to violence.

In primitive societies, ritual sacrifice was central to religion and served to regulate violence in these societies. Ritualized, “sacred” killings developed to dissipate and substitute for the communities desire for violence. A victim was selected (or in our case the “scapegoat”) to which the society projected its evil.

The Bible is unique in that Yahweh takes the side of the victim!

The Hebrew scriptures is first instance in ancient world where God identifies with victims doing this by choosing slaves to be “his people.” And Girard adds that in Christ’s Passion the scapegoating mechanism is exposed. Now scapegoating according to Girard follows a process or a mechanism.

Girard’s scapegoating mechanism:

- To end violence a final killing is necessary. A crisis weakens normal institutions and a mob mentality begins to form. (A severe economic depression hits Germany after WWI. Crowds are starting to listen to and follow Jesus)
- One person or group is identified as the victim. Acceptance of differences declines as hostilities increase. (Jews are different; language, culture and religion. Jesus came from the fringes of society and hung with outcasts.)
- A necessary fiction is created to identify the victim as the cause of the crisis. Causes are viewed in simplistic terms. Even persecutors become convinced of their own persecution and under the control of the scapegoat. (Jews control the banks and are getting rich while “real” Germans become poorer. Jesus attacks both the religious and social structures of his day and such an upheaval is considered calamitous.)

-- Surrogate chosen must be vulnerable and without supporters to continue retaliation. Persecutors seek to purge community of impure elements. (In spite of their relative wealth and influence Jews are still a minority on a continent with a history of anti-semitism. Jesus' rag tag revolutionaries have only two swords which is not much of a threat.)

-- Group becomes unanimous in assigning blame. Those chosen for scapegoating cannot prove their innocence nor can their guilt be proved. (Jesus is tried in a kangaroo court where eye witness testimonies do not agree.)

-- Victim is condemned, killed or ostracized. "Peace" returns, unity is achieved, the power of the scapegoat confirmed and the myth of redemptive violence reaffirmed. (The Germans were united and prosperous for a time under the Third Reich. The land of Israel, the temple and the priestly class prospered until CE 70 when the Romans destroyed it all in retaliation to a violent Jewish insurrection!")

And for Girard, the central and unique truth of Christ's passion is that it clearly exposes the scapegoating mechanism. But by "truth" I do not necessarily mean that every detail in the gospels happened just as it is recorded. Truth is much larger than mere facts. The "truth" in Christ's passion is that the powers have violated justice by killing an innocent victim

and thus the myth of redemptive violence is shattered. The scapegoat mechanism is exposed, naked for all to see and no longer must we follow along with the crowd. The narrative created by the culture, regarding the victim can be brought into question. Simplistic assumptions are now challenged by a deeper “truth!” We are no longer held hostage to the false narratives or the morally bankrupt rituals or to our mimetic desires.

But the power of mimetic desire is hard to resist. Even Pilate is unable to resist the crowd. Knowing that Jesus is innocent Pilate tries to let him go but fearing the mob will riot he gives into their demands. The power of the scapegoating mechanism is also potent enough to unify even enemies like: Herod, Pilate and the Pharisees. Even the disciples run and hide and are speechless- where were all those folks who welcomed Jesus with shouts of joy only a few days earlier? Caiaphas as we read, demonstrates how primary leaders must join the scapegoating to solidify it. He seems almost too blunt in his candor but his words reverberate through human history of the cold necessity of group survival. “Better one or only a few be sacrificed for the survival of the many!” But we must admit, there is a logic in this a cruel hard logic that makes sense especially if you are to be one of the survivors.

But Jesus models the ultimate response to the scapegoating mechanism. Jesus chooses not to resist its power with violence but with forgiveness and by doing this the cycle of mimetic violence is broken. Its risky, its dangerous and it is very, very costly, but it is the only way the chain of violent retaliation can be broken. And by being witnesses to the Resurrection, Christ's followers are empowered and thus able to separate themselves from the collective violence of the crowd and this destroyed its unanimity.

This is the truth of Christ's passion. Jesus calls us away from mimetic rivalries, by inviting us to imitate him and to follow the way of the cross. Jesus' teaching on love of enemies and non-retaliation against evil is the new mimesis. This is the pearl of great price, a new desire so captivating that it consumes all other desires to the point that we gladly will sacrifice everything else in order to obtain it.

But imitating Christ, especially in the midst of conflict and scapegoating is serious business for it means, forgiveness, forgiving as God in Christ forgave us. It means love, loving as God loved us! Just as God loved us, even when we were yet enemies in rebellion to God's purposes. And last but certainly not the least, serving- serving others just as Christ became a servant of all. Hmm... now that sounds familiar... where have I heard something like this before? (read FCMF motto)

On his way into Jerusalem the religious leaders pleaded with him to control his jubilant followers. Were they afraid that all this might get out of hand- fearing that the crowd would turn violent, leading to a violent reprisal by the Roman occupation force? But Jesus refused to rein it all in, “If I do tell them to stop stones will take their place!” Jesus is saying that he cannot, will not, stop what he has started. The choice is really up to those who hold the power, they can deal with him and his nonviolent movement or they can continue their oppressive ways knowing full well that oppressed folk will eventually respond violently, using what ever weapons they can find- even stones. But Jesus’ calls is to something different, he calls us to become a “new creation” to become living stones- rocks picked up in order to build and to heal rather than as weapons to hurt each other. And this new model of mimetic desire is not only the Jesus of suffering, forgiving and humble service, but also the exalted and vindicated Jesus.

And it was this Jesus who captivated the crowd with the hope of a new way. A way which has also been vindicated in human history with the names of far too many peacemakers for us to recite today. The way of Jesus has worked, is working, working far more than the powerful dare to admit. The way of Jesus is salvation- saving us here and now from ourselves as well as giving us a hope for tomorrow!

Hosanna, Glory to God in the highest, blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna, Gloria in excelsis Deo! For this is both good news and a great joy for all people. Hosanna! and thanks be to God and do not be afraid, for unto you is born this day a savior! Hosanna, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and good will to each and everyone!