

Pentecost 21, Proper 24  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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### The Scapegoat and the Lamb

This was the caption on a 2012 YouTube video I watched recently:

*Over 6,000 pounds of food per year, on 1/10 acre located just 15 minutes from downtown Los Angeles. The Dervais family grows over 400 species of plants, 4,300 pounds of vegetable food, 900 chicken and 1,000 duck eggs, 25 lbs of honey, plus seasonal fruits throughout the year. From 1/10th of an acre, four people manage to get over 90% of their daily food and the family reports earnings of \$20,000 per year (AFTER they eat from what is produced). This is done without the use of the expensive & destructive synthetic chemicals associated with industrial mono-cropping, while simultaneously improving the fertility and overall condition of the land being used to grow this food on. Scaled up to an acre, that would equal \$200,000 per year!*

*Search it on YouTube (Urbanhomesteading)*

Jules Dervais calls it, "The Path to Freedom." As you watch the video several things stand out. First, he is not angry. He just tries to live off the grid on the land he has. Second, he names the truth. This is dangerous, because one minimizes one's dependence on large corporations who can only survive on large customer bases. Because one is not dependent one is free.

There are those who badmouth him, to be sure. I'm sure that Mr. Dervais is not perfect. One comment on the website calls him "scum." His "Path to Freedom" is not foolproof or failsafe. There are even inconsistencies, like the solar panels that power their operation, and the bio-diesel that is manufactured from fry-oil donated to them by restaurants. Whenever we open our mouths we place our soul in front of our listeners. Our words speak much more eloquently about ourselves than they do about anything else. When they attack Mr. Girard, why do they speak as they do?

Theologian Rene Girard would say this is a classic case of the Scapegoat. Scapegoating is a human anthropological phenomenon, he says, in his book by the same name, by which equilibrium is reestablished in a given social order at the expense of an individual or a group. It is always the story of persecution told from the perspective of the persecutor. But, says Girard, it only works if it is not conscious. If at any time the innocence of the victim is allowed to be revealed, then the guilt of the persecutors is also revealed. The mechanism only works if it is not shown the light of day.

In the Old Testament the sins of the people were laid on the head of a goat (Leviticus, chapter 16.) That goat was driven out into the desert, out of the community, bearing the community's sins. This prefigured the Sacrifice for Sin, that entailed, not a goat, but a pure male lamb. Bring that image forward and we talk about Jesus being the Lamb of God. He is clearly the victim of collective violence, but more importantly, says Girard, the Gospel stories peel the mask off the scapegoat. In the light of Christ the process can no longer be subconscious. It is brought to the light of day and proven what it is—human brokenness.

He claims, and I agree, that every time a person or a group of people is demonized it is a doomed attempt at exorcism. By putting the blame on another we fail to see the blame we share. Persecution is always a two-way street. The demon is in us as well. We are merely throwing stones to hide our hands. Scapegoating, then, is always the work of human pride. It places the persecutors above the persecuted, and dares to sacrifice another for one's own good.

In today's lessons we see the mask removed. In Isaiah the prophet describes a new idea for Israel. Until that time the prophets had railed against Israel for their unfaithfulness to the Covenant with God. The Exile was evident proof, they said, of the wayward ways of God's people. This was punishment, meant to purify the people as a refiner's fire purifies gold. But such a message wears thin after a while. How much purifying is needed? Obviously a little more because the nation was not yet a sovereign nation once again. The idea had its time and place, but condemnation of sin does not necessarily result in restoration. Taken too far, the prophets end up being the ones who scapegoat Israel for the sake of God.

There must be another way. If Israel cannot atone for its sins, then God must intervene. God will provide one who will reconcile Israel. This Suffering Servant will take upon himself the sins of the people and suffer vicariously for them. Through his suffering the nation will be restored. It is not a scapegoat, for this servant does so freely. It is an act of self-giving, not an act of collective violence against the one.

Hebrews casts Jesus in the role of the Suffering Servant who has been elevated to Great High Priest. This book is written to the victims of scapegoating. In July of the year 64 the city of Rome burned. Caesar Nero (who was suspected of having started the blaze, blamed the Christians, initiating the first wave of persecution of the early Church. In the midst of this suffering, the Suffering Servant of Yahweh, as promised, takes upon himself the sins not just of God's people, but of the whole world. This Sacrificial Lamb, empathetic with our struggles, for they are his as well, offers comfort and exoneration to a scapegoated people.

In the Gospel lesson Jesus charges headlong into this theme. James and John, still thinking that Jesus' great work would be to raise an army and throw off the yoke of bondage of Rome, begin jockeying for key positions in the Kingdom to come. "Let us sit, one at your right hand and one at your left." ("Let us be #2 and #3." Of course, they haven't worked out just WHO would be #2 and WHO would be #3, and given their attitude, this is bound to surface as an issue, but such is their request.)

What is really happening is that James and John are doing what so many Israelites of the day were doing. Rome was the Big Problem. If Rome wasn't on the scene we could be the People of God as God intends. Rome is the one who must be taken out of the picture. Rome becomes the scapegoat, and the target of James' and John's call to collective violence. Jesus will have none of it. Jesus will become the Sacrificial Lamb, and in being scapegoated by humanity in the Cross, Jesus will break the power of the mechanism of scapegoating and its lies, establishing in its place the Kingdom of Truth and Love. Positions of influence in the Kingdom are based on Kingdom values. If James and John want such positions they must show that they can lead in the direction this Kingdom is going. They must be examples of self-giving love. In the Kingdom, because of Christ, the Lamb of God, the face of pride is peeled off the human soul revealing the mix we are, sometimes sinful, sometimes saintly, sometimes faithful to the image of God within, and sometimes dreadfully unfaithful, yet always called, wooed and beckoned to honesty, humility, and self-giving love. In the Kingdom there can be no scapegoats, only daughters and sons. There may need to be direction, correction, and guidance, but never crucifixion.

How, then, shall we live? If the resurrection of Jesus Christ breaks the power of the scapegoat then we have good news for the world. If we are here to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus Christ and what that means for the world then its effect on scapegoating cannot be omitted. In Christ there is no room for collective violence against the vulnerable.

Where are the scapegoats, then? The first ones are within ourselves. There are some parts of ourselves that we do not share widely because we hold them to be unacceptable. There may be things we do that are unacceptable, for sure. Augustine of Hippo was one of the most famous of the Church's theologians to note that behind every sin is a good desire. Eating is a good thing, without it we die. Eating too much is not a good thing, and eating too little isn't either. Both anorexia and bulimia are good desires gone wrong. The sin is not in the desire, it is in its perversion. We release our own inner scapegoats when we turn our eye to the good desire. We honor it, and we learn to wire around the perversion. What is your exiled good desire, scapegoated by laying on it all that you would exorcize out of yourself? Bring it to the light of day. Call it what it is, and love it

into life and health.

The second ones are in our communities. Who do we like to blame for society's ills?

There are a hundred different ones, people of another:

- Language,
- Culture,
- Place of origin, and manner in which they arrived,
- Religious practice,
- Sexual orientation,
- Addictions,
- Or health conditions, to name a few.

Like our inner scapegoats, the reality of who these people are is probably a whole lot more nuanced than we allow. Yes, they are different, and to be sure there are practices in which they engage that we might not prefer, or even condone. To be sure, they hold to values we do not share. But scapegoating takes two to tango, the victim and the persecutor. To blame the victim for society's ills is to throw stones to hide one's hands. Bring it to the table, name it for what it is, admit one's own guilt before assigning it to another, and dispel the mechanism of persecution.

The third ones are in our world. There are communities who are used to purge the social consciousness. They get enslaved in domestic slavery. They get bought and sold for manual labor. They get abused in homes. They get forced from their homes into unwanted exile, often in places that don't want them, either. If the Church stands with the Lamb of God, then the Church stands with all scapegoats. The Church proclaims the good news that in Christ they are not victims, they are fellow human beings who have as much right to approach God as any of us, and who are offered redemption through Christ along with all of us.