

“Rethinking the Cross; Understanding Scapegoat Theory”

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This morning we’re going to make our fifth turn of the gem, by looking at the cross through the angle of what’s called Scapegoat Theory. You probably all know what a scapegoat is. The dictionary defines it as: **a person who is blamed for the wrongdoings, mistakes, or faults of others.** Now, what you may not know is that this word was first used when William Tyndale first translated the Bible into English, and it describes a specific kind of Old Testament sacrifice. Several weeks ago, now, Pastor Joe outlined the Jewish sacrificial system for us, since so much of the imagery we find in scripture for the cross ties directly back to it. But like Joe said, we’re now so far removed from the ancient sacrificial system that when we start talking about animal sacrifice or blood being sprinkled for the purification of sins, we rightly get a bit squeamish. But if you want to understand the cross, you’ll have to get somewhat familiar with sacrifice.

Now, as we get into this, I want to remind you that the sacrificial system has always been something for the benefit of humanity. Using sacrifice to make sense of our sin; it’s something WE NEED. It’s not for God’s benefit, but for ours. Humanity has always needed guidelines for how to function in community. People don’t know what to do when they fail or how to feel forgiven; they need some sort of justice system to help them function. So, God, meeting humanity where they were at, gives the Jewish people the sacrificial system we find outlined in the Torah, as a tool.

Now remember, blood sacrifice predated the Israelites. Ancient pagan cultures actually had far more severe sacrificial systems to appease the pagan Gods, whether we’re talking about ancient Egyptians or Canaanites. Things like child sacrifice and bloody human temple rituals were part of the wider religious culture. So, when God gives Moses a structure for *animal* sacrifice, God’s actually reining in the cultural practices that surround the Israelites. God is using a structure that they understood but putting clear boundaries around it to ensure it’s not abused... all the while providing a system that will help the Israelites keep their sin and violence from going unchecked. This system was intended to help the community maintain justice.

In Leviticus 16 we find the ritual from which our word “scapegoating” originated. **“In this way the high priest will make atonement for the sanctuary because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been... The priest is**

**to lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat’s head. He shall then send the goat away into the wilderness... the goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place.” Lev. 16:16, 21-22**

What we find here, is that on the Day of Atonement, the priest figuratively placed all the sins of the Jewish people from the previous year onto the animal. Then this cursed goat was driven out into the desert wilderness, taking the sins of the community far, far away. Once the scapegoat was gone, the community would again be pure, and they could go home rejoicing, feeling relieved that their sins had been removed. This is where the term scapegoat really comes from.

Scapegoat Atonement Theory was first articulated in the work of Rene Girard, who was a French interdisciplinary scholar. He began as a literary critic and anthropologist, before becoming a theologian. In his work analyzing human cultures and languages throughout history, he argues that there is this feature—*common to all humanity, no matter when or where*—that he calls **Mimetic Desire**. Mimetic desire is this: Human beings are hardwired to learn and function through imitation, through mimicking one another. As infants we learn to walk and talk this way, by mimicking what we see around us. Even more, our desires and decision-making function this way too; we want what we see others have and we choose what others choose. We’re just not nearly as independent as we think we are.

It’s why marketing and advertising are so effective; they are using our mimetic desire against us... telling us what we want, what we ought to purchase, and even what we should believe about the world. Now this is fairly innocuous if we’re talking about selling a particular brand of dish soap or whether we choose an apple or android cell phone. But when our desires lead to what Girard calls **Mimetic Rivalry**—when we want something that someone else has—we can get into trouble pretty quickly. What happens when two people want the last parking spot in a crowded parking lot? Or when two coworkers are after the same promotion at work? Or think about it more communally. What happens when two different political parties both want their politicians to control the Supreme Court? Or when two different people groups (both Israelis and Palestinians) both claim that the same piece of contested land is their ancient, ancestral home? As I’m sure you see, our competing mimetic desires become a serious problem when they lead us to want something so badly, that we’re willing to resort to violence to get it.

This is what Girard argues lies at the heart of human sinfulness and is undeniably present in every culture throughout history. Open the book of Genesis and what is the first crime after sin enters the equation? Cain kills his brother Abel because of his memetic rivalry. It is this rivalry and violence that plague humanity. We simply cannot function without resorting to cycles of communal violence. So how do we deal with this? Well Girard says that in order to keep the violence from snowballing, to keep these rivalries from destroying society, a **scapegoat mechanism** has to be used, to act as a sort of release-valve to reduce the pressure of rivalry and violence. What is a scapegoat mechanism? The community focuses their anger and violence on a single, innocent victim, often someone at the margins, or who might look differently than the group. Everyone's anger is piled onto that victim, the scapegoat is blamed for the problems in the community, and that victim is sacrificed, which relieves the pressure in the community; at least for a while, until the next scapegoat is needed. And here's the thing, it really does work. There is unity and peace when everyone decides to scapegoat. Instead of the group being at each other's throats, the scapegoat takes the heat, bringing a sense of relief and even comradery among the group.

But here's an interesting piece, for the scapegoat mechanism to really work, it has to operate in the unconscious. People do not know what they are doing. Or as Girard says, **"to have a scapegoat is not to know that one has one. As soon as the scapegoat is revealed and named as such, it loses its power."** For the pressure-valve to work, we need to be blind to it. We've got to truly believe that the scapegoat really is to blame for all the problems in our community... so therefore, we're doing a good thing, maybe even a holy thing by scapegoating them. Here's an old European example: we can only burn a woman at the stake if we're convinced, she's really a witch. The village will only feel better, if in their mind, she's really guilty and so they've done the good work of ridding the community of danger.

But once we're blindly convinced of a scapegoat's guilt, people will go pretty far in the name of scapegoating. You can see it everywhere. It's what the Germans did to the Jews. It's what the British and Dutch did to Africa. It's what American colonizers did to the Indigenous tribes and then later to enslaved people. It's what many folks did to anyone who resembled middle eastern ethnicity after 9/11 and what many did to the Chinese when the Coronavirus first began to spread. It's what both our political parties are doing to immigrants at the Southern Border right now, uniting around a common enemy. Scapegoating happens around family dinner tables, in office conference rooms, and on

every single school-yard playground. We take all our angst, all our shame, all our rivalry, and then we find someone else to blame for it. We find an innocent, common enemy to hate and then we decide they're the one to blame for all that's wrong in this world, and we scapegoat them.

This scapegoating mechanism, is how many scholars articulate what happened to Jesus at the cross. Theologian Miroslav Volf writes, **"The cross lays bare the mechanism of scapegoating."** Jesus is made the common enemy and scapegoated. The religious authorities (like Caiaphas and the high priests), the political powers (like Herod and Pilate), and the larger crowds... they come together in their hatred of Jesus, working together to violently sacrifice him. In John's gospel we're told that scapegoating is precisely what the religious leaders had in mind. John 11:47-50, 53 (NIV): **"Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. "What are we accomplishing?" they asked. "Here is this man performing many signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation." Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, "You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people, than that the whole nation perish." So, from that day on they plotted to take his life."**

And then Luke includes this telling note, after the political authorities, Pilate and Herod, had worked together to interrogate Jesus before his crucifixion, **"That same day Herod and Pilot became friends with each other; before this they had been enemies." - Luke 23:12** Nothing like a common scapegoat to bring enemies together.

And if it couldn't be clearer, Mark 15:6-15 (NIV) tells us: **"Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did. "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, knowing it was out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead. "What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them. "Crucify him!" they shouted. "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged and handed him over to be crucified."**

And as our savior hangs from the cross, he says, **“Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing.” -Luke 23:34** Jesus knows they’re blind to what they’re really doing.

And then, at the moment of Jesus’ death, the gospel writers include a declaration from one of the centurion soldiers who had helped to crucify Jesus. Suddenly he realizes what they have done, saying, **“Surely, this man was innocent.”** (Luke 23:47) Mark and Matthew record the centurion as adding, **“surely this man was the son of God.”**

Scapegoat theory argues that the power of what happened on Good Friday is ultimately an atoning revelation. On the cross, we find out who we really are... that we are the murderous crowd, self-deceived into scapegoating God. Even more, revealed on the cross is the truth that our reliance on sacrifice and scapegoating is what drives us away from God. It is not God who is appeased by sacrifice. Rather, it is humanity that is satisfied by violent sacrifice, we are the ones who depend on scapegoating to have peace. And all this time, we’ve just been projecting our need for violence onto God.

But on the cross we finally come to see that God was willing to die for us, to bear our sin in this particular way, to rise from the dead the ever-innocent scapegoat, to show us how blind we have been. In Jesus’ very words on the cross... “they don’t know what they are doing”... the scapegoat is revealed and the scales finally fall from our eyes. As Richard Rohr puts it, **“Jesus became the scapegoat to reveal the universal lie of scapegoating.”**

The critiques of this theory are similar to those given for Moral Influence, in that no one really disagrees that this rightly explains some elements of what is happening on the cross... but folks aren’t sure it goes far enough. For example people ask:

**How does scapegoating: 1. Address the cosmic problem of Satan, death, evil? 2. Address willful human sin (we’re not always “blind” in our sin)? 3. Address our ongoing tendency to scapegoat (we just keep doing it)? Address how, specifically, this atones for our sins?** These are all excellent critiques and worth exploring.

Let’s close by talking about how this saves us, how this atones for our sins. In Scapegoat Theory we are saved because it wasn’t just *anyone* who revealed the lie of scapegoating... it was God. God came in the person of Christ, from outside of humanity’s brokenness and sin, and willingly became our truly innocent sacrifice. He allowed us to lay

all our sin upon him and to not just send him out into the wilderness, but to nail him to a cross. This is why Jesus is described in Scripture as the lamb who is slain (Revelation 5:12) or as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The perfect, sinless, God in the flesh, enters the world to take all our blame, all our shame, all our violence... and then exposes all of it as plain as day. We see what we’ve done, we see who we really are. Then and only then, can we receive God’s forgiveness, for then and only then do we recognize our need for it.

Jesus is final scapegoat, he has eliminated the need for any future scapegoats or sacrifices. Or, in the words of Girard, **“God Himself reuses the scapegoat mechanism, at his own expense, in order to subvert it.”** -Rene Girard Once the truth is exposed, once our sin is forgiven, no further earthly sacrifice is expected, accepted, or even possible. The ultimate sacrifice has been made by Christ, and no matter what we’ve done, no matter what violence we have wrought, in Christ, we get to be forgiven. Amen.