

27th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Violence and the Sacred” 2020

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My friends, our first reading from Isaiah concludes, “The Lord looked for good judgment, but instead saw bloodshed. The Lord looked for justice, but hark, the outcry!” I firmly believe with all the anger in our country today and the frustration that is felt globally with Covid 19, this Sunday’s readings come at a good time for our consideration. And, I don’t know about you, but I can find myself sometimes feeling all kinds of emotions from everything going on right now. The bible teaches us there is sometimes anger, frustration and fear within us that projects itself out, that can harm our relationships with others and even wound our relationship with God. Of course, we don’t need the bible to tell us that. We can see this in the world around us every day and throughout the history of the world.

I have shared with you before that one of my favorite books in seminary is entitled “Violence and the Sacred” by Rene Girard. Girard is an anthropological philosopher who chronicled the theme of violence in every religion and culture throughout history. In ancient societies, there was a common theme throughout the globe of performing a sacrifice as a way to keeping peace.

How it worked is if you had a rivalry between people or groups of people, the violence would be redirected towards a third party who becomes the scapegoat, like we see in Leviticus where the term scapegoat comes from, the coliseum in ancient Rome to distract the masses, or most nefariously with Nazi Germany. The scapegoat can unify the rivaling factions for a time but it doesn’t last.

Girard had an interesting and compelling system on how these rivalries develop, which we don’t have time today to sufficiently address, suffice to say whether the violence is present between tribes, between cultures, within communities, between political parties, between families, family members, or even the violence that is directed inward towards the self, this is what Girard has to say about the human condition, he says, “Only violence can put an end to violence, and that is why violence is self-propagating.” Let’s hear that again, “Only violence can put an end to violence, and that is why violence is self-propagating.” I believe the perpetual violence ingrained in the human heart is why Jesus wept as he surveyed Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. I also believe this is why Jesus became incarnate for us and for the sake of our salvation.

You see, the theme of perpetuating violence isn’t limited to what we see in the world today as we can see it play out within religions, between religions, between people with different political belief systems, between people with different color of skin, and even between family members.

Here at the parish, it seems like a week can't go by without someone telling me how a violent action or exchange of words between a brother, sister, parent, or child has led to decades of bitterness and brokenness. And blame is thrown around. With everything that we are all dealing with these days with the pandemic, it is getting easier and easier to take it out on those we love.

And how do people generally deal with the cycle of violence? For Rene Girard, it doesn't matter what belief system we adhere to, we respond to the cycle of violence ultimately through forms of sacrifice whether we are conscious of it or not. Girard writes, "Any community that has fallen prey to violence or has been stricken by some overwhelming catastrophe hurls itself blindly into the search for a scapegoat. Its members instinctually seek an immediate and violent cure for the onslaught of unbearable violence and strive desperately to convince themselves that all their ills are the fault of a lone individual who can be easily disposed of. [He continues] Such circumstances bring to mind the forms of violence that break out spontaneously in countries convulsed by crises: lynchings, pogroms, etc." That is an interesting perspective isn't it? When in crises, we seek to blame a lone individual who can easily be disposed of.

Rhetorical question: Who here has ever seen that happen in the workplace? Who has seen this take place in our neighborhoods or cities? Who here has seen this happen at home? Of course this never happens in politics right? We have been seeing this in politics for years; everyone pointing fingers as if all our problems can be the fault of this or that person or group. A rhetorical question: who here agrees with the Church's doctrine of original sin? Yeah, me too. The truth is, when the pain is great enough in personal life or in society, the scapegoat is found, the sacrifice performed, and violence puts an end to violence. The problem is: this kind of violence is self-propagating.

And so, Jesus said to the chief priests and the elders of the people: "Hear another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went on a journey. When vintage time drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to obtain his produce.

But the tenants seized the servants and one they beat, another they killed, and a third they stoned. Again he sent other servants, more numerous than the first ones, but they treated them in the same way. Finally, he sent his son to them, thinking, 'They will respect my son.' But when the tenants saw the son, they said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and acquire his inheritance.' They seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him."

And Jesus asks them, what will the land owner do? They answer, naturally, that the land owner will kill the tenants. The land owner will use violence to put an end to violence. The problem is that violence only self-perpetuates. And then Jesus redirects the conversation cleverly, foreshadowing the divine agenda. Jesus said to them, "Did you never read in the Scriptures: *The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; by the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes?*"

My friends, Jesus is talking about himself. The Son of God who was without sin was crucified in atonement for our sins. The stone that the builders rejected has become the corner stone. The cross is the violence that ends all violence, if we could only understand the cross properly in this way. And this is why the concept of Christianity is so critically important for Rene Girard, so different and so revelatory. Instead of sacrificing a scapegoat to the deity for our atonement, God turns the tables. God becomes the sacrifice on our behalf. This is why Christianity, properly understood, offers the sacrifice that ends all sacrifices.

There can never be a more perfect sacrifice than Jesus Christ crucified. Instead of processing forward to a pagan altar to participate in the sacrifice of an animal or a human as a scapegoat for our sins, we process forward to the perfect sacrifice of the altar, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, truly present and given to us, body, blood soul and divinity in the Holy Eucharist. God unites his peaceful nature to our own. Through the Eucharist, we are invited into the inner life of God, where there is no more violence, only eternal love.

A challenge for this week is to consider: Who are the people in our lives we have turned into scapegoats? I ask this again. Who are the people in our lives and the world around us who we have turned into scapegoats? When were the times that we gossiped about people, maligning their characters, and scapegoating them unfairly, at work, in our neighborhoods or at home? Who are the people we have ganged up against unjustly, in our local, national or global politics? In the times in which we live, I think we really need to ask ourselves: am I behaving like a Christian should in the days we live in or am I part of the problem?

The invitation this Sunday is to contemplate the stone that the builders rejected that has become the corner stone. We are invited to treat the people around us with respect and deal with the hard issues we face in a spirit of truth, however complex the truth can be. We are invited to transcend the violence within us and embrace our first vocation as stewards of the Father's vineyard. After all, we know that the Landowner will return someday and require an accounting of our deeds.

And, as an aside, this is why the Church calls us to respect life this month and every month. In response to the violence in the world, the Church is a counter cultural voice in the wilderness calling the world to respect all human life, from womb to tomb, and every stage, demographic and color in between. And when we need a scapegoat, instead of scapegoating other people or turning that violence inward and scapegoating ourselves, the Father in heaven suggests turning our gaze to his son Jesus Christ crucified for us and for our salvation. You see, in the cross, destructive self-propagating violence is returned with divine self-propagating love. This is the most powerful force in the universe. My friends, this is the most powerful force in the universe. No matter what crises we encounter, the best solution to violence is love.