

A sermon preached at Maple Street Congregational Church,
United Church of Christ
Danvers, MA
Date: April 23, 2017
Rev. Kevin M. Smith, Pastor
Luke 24:36b-49

“Hope for Total Renewal”

Let’s talk about goats this morning! The *Miriam Webster Dictionary* defines “scapegoat” as a goat that departs (from the Hebrew word 'azAzEl as in 'Ez 'OzEl). This was the goat described in the Book of Leviticus (16:8) and is “a goat upon whose head [is] symbolically placed the sins of the people after which [the goat] is sent into the wilderness. [A scapegoat is] one that bears the blame for others... [Or] one that is the object of irrational hostility.”¹

Throughout human history we have seen the use of the scapegoat to absolve the community in power of whatever is ailing it. There is a pattern of people fighting each other, or arguing with each other, who eventually realize that the fighting or arguing is getting too dangerous or too costly or too threatening to their own well-being. They begin to focus their attention on some group or individual who is different or perhaps weak or both and they collectively decide to sacrifice that group or individual, laying all their blame for sins on that group or person. The act of eliminating that person or group, for a time, brings people together and reduces their common angst and anger against each other. The world witnessed how the Nazi’s and Nazi Germany blamed Jews, gypsies, gays and lesbians for all the ills of their society and sacrificed them at the barrel of a gun or in a room filled with lethal gas. We might also look how the Roman rulers and temple leadership decided to heap their problems on the head of a subversive prophet named Jesus of Nazareth.

Scapegoating is like a situation in a children’s nursery where two kids are quietly playing with their own toys and ignoring the pile of toys over in the corner. Then a third child comes in and begins to look around for a toy to play with and goes over to the neglected pile and gets a toy. Pretty soon the other two children, who were ignoring that toy before, think the new child is onto to something good and they decide *they* want that toy. So, they begin arguing and fighting over that toy which they had neglected before and could have cared less about. Pretty soon, the two children are arguing with the other child and eventually begin to take out their aggression on the new child who then becomes the scapegoat.

In our text this morning from the Gospel of Luke we hear about a flesh and blood Jesus who has been executed by the rulers of the time. Jesus of Nazareth was considered a subversive prophet even though he did not take up arms against the Roman rulers and never called for the overthrow of the Torah as being the sacred text of God. But Jesus did call upon people to enter into the existing and future reign of God by loving each

other above and beyond the words of the commandments. Jesus had preached of a kingdom beyond and unlike the temporal earthly kingdom of Caesar. He talked about a kingdom where we love our enemies and we turn the other cheek.³ He treated the outcasts of society—the lepers, the Samaritans, women, the poor, even the tax collectors and rich—as people deserving of the love of God and even invited them into his life and to his meal table. Jesus had disciples, but he did not have an army. He was different and he was weak in the eyes of the privileged and powerful of the time. He was not a member of the ruling or privileged class either in the temple or in the government. Jesus became their scapegoat.

But something was different about this scapegoat born in a manger and raised in the no-count town of Nazareth. This scapegoat, unlike all the scapegoats throughout human anthropology, returns and is resurrected and experienced by people after he has been killed and buried! He reappears to the disciples on the road to Emmaus when he picks up bread and breaks it. He later appears to the disciples gathered in the upper room. He shows them the wounds on his body and eats a fish with them! Now whether you believe that there was bodily resurrection or not is a debate for another day. But, I think what the author of Luke, and later the Book of Acts, is trying to say is that something big and very new had happened in history.

Instead of the scapegoat simply dying and going away—out of sight, out of mind—this scapegoat, this Jesus the Christ, has come back and people continue to experience the living Jesus acting in their own lives. Jesus, after his crucifixion and death, was not only a living presence to his followers, the disciples, but also to the author and people of the time the gospel was written—some fifty to eighty years after Jesus of Nazareth walked the earth. Even more importantly for us today is that people still experience Jesus in their own lives as a friend, a companion, a comforter and as one who challenges them to love their neighbor and be a better person.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' resurrection is about defeating the scapegoating mechanism and focusing on God's power to create new life, to transform us. Luke teaches that it is our faith that makes us well (Luke 17:19) and that the kingdom or reign of God is already among us (Luke 17:21). We do not need to create scapegoats to resolve our differences. We do not need scapegoats to protect us from unseen or perceived fears. Our lives are not threatened by people who are different. And people who are different do not threaten our families, our church, or our lives. In fact, if we just look hard enough, below the surface, we might find in those different than ourselves a loving person full of compassion, and faith, and forgiveness who wants to work with us in increasing the reign of God. Creating scapegoats only keeps us spiritually immature and separated. Creating scapegoats is no longer necessary and it does not solve a thing. Jesus taught us that. We should not make scapegoats out of a whole class of people just because a minority does terrible things. Jesus defeated the scapegoating mechanism.

Henri Nouwen says, we can “look suffering and death straight in the face” and we can “go through them [ourselves] in the hope of a new God-given life.” Nouwen says that “this is the sign of Jesus and of every human being who wishes to lead a spiritual life in imitation of him. It is the sign of the cross: the sign of suffering and death, but also of

the hope for total renewal.” (Nouwen, Henri. *The Wounded Healer*.) It is the sign of the hope for our own transformation. Creating scapegoats of people will not renew our lives or transform us, trusting in God together will. Loving our neighbor and welcoming them into our lives will. Amen.

(I am indebted to René Girard for the underlying theology of this sermon.)

² Ibid. *The Jewish Study Bible*, 245.

(Biblical scholar Baruch Schwartz in The Jewish Study Bible has commented on this passage from Leviticus in the Torah. He says that “The Rabbis [gave meaning to this goat that departs and explained that]...the sins of the people are symbolically cast into the realm beyond civilization [the wilderness, if you will], to become the property of a being who is the antithesis of the God of Israel.” This being, of course, is the demon 'azAzEl.)²

³(See Biesecker-Mast, Gerald J. *Reading Rene Girard's and Walter Wink's Religious Critiques of Violence as Radical Communication Ethics* at <http://www.bluffton.edu/~mastg/Girard.htm>.)

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¹ See Miriam Webster Online Dictionary at <http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/scapegoat> and Berlin, Adele and Brettler, Marc Zvi (eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible*, Lev. 16:8 notes, (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 245.