

*Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA; August 14, 2022
(by zoom... covid)*

“The Gospel of the Lord?” Isn’t Luke supposed to be the happy, hippy gospel, where Jesus is only interested in doing good things? This the Gospel that inspires our social justice work, the Gospel that has the quintessential story of grace, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Gospel that has the Sermon the plain where everybody is standing on one level, equal to one another. But these words from Jesus stand in sharp contrast. Those of us who think we should be working for peace hear from Jesus that it may be elusive, and maybe even that our efforts may be in vain. These words have puzzled many readers of the years. Were they just there to make early Christians who were persecuted feel better, as if this were all part of the plan? Maybe.

But in the 1960s, a writer named René Girard set out to answer the question of why religions are so often wrapped up with violence—and specifically, he wanted to know why violent sacrifice, of animals and people, was so widely known throughout the world. And so he developed a theory, a theory of scapegoating. All of our human societies, all of them, evolved to “cast out” a scapegoat from time to time. This was, he thought, how human beings formed group identities. “Hey, there’s a witch or a demon or a...” and all the people would unite against that one. Voila! A cohesive society was born. This was how we learned to live peaceably among one another, he surmised. All of the peace we achieve comes at the expense of a guilty one we cast out.

Of course, they weren't really witches or demons, but the important point was that people believed that they were. They were "guilty," in the eyes of the people, but really they were no more "guilty" than anybody else.

And over the centuries and millennia these habits were funneled into religious rites like temple sacrifices to the great variety of gods. But past those rites, these impulses are still with us today. Any time we form friendships or other unities at the expense of another—from political identities built on demonizing minorities or immigrants to simply bullying children on the playground—we are enacting this ancient act of "casting out." And I suspect those experiences are familiar enough to you. Maybe you've been "cast out," and maybe you can recall ways that you have formed your own identity with others and the expense of some scapegoat figure.

But when Girard turned his attention to Christianity, he wasn't quite sure what to make of the crucifixion. It seemed like a sacrifice like so many others, but this one was different: it didn't stick. The scapegoat came back. What Girard saw was that in the resurrection, Jesus revealed to the disciples and to the rest of us, what exactly we were doing when we cast somebody out. We were creating a false identity at the expense of another. This is what made Christianity different, he said. All the other religions were sacrifices to gods at the expense of others. But they weren't "guilty" at all—we were! The sacrifice of Jesus wasn't to the Father—an angry god in need of appeasement—it was to us, and our need to cast others out and away to tell ourselves who we are. Christianity was the undoing of such systems. The revelation was that this God didn't need or want anything of the sort and that

these efforts were always deeply flawed, based on a lie about the victim. The victim was never guilty; the rest of us are.

This, Girard said, is exactly why Jesus says he's come to bring the sword. He's about to take away the method that we've always used for making our group identities, our peace—violence against another—and we're going to do everything we can to resist it. "I have not come to bring peace," he tells the disciples, "because the peace you know is a false peace, at the expense of vulnerable others." And as we've seen in the centuries since, we will continue to pick up the sword over and against others. Or as someone else put it: "Give people a common enemy, and you will give them a common identity. Deprive them of an enemy and you will deprive them of the crutch by which they know who they are."¹

But this is not who Jesus was. Jesus did not play those same sorts of games. And when Jesus walked out of the tomb, came and stood among the disciples, and said, "Peace be with you"—Jesus was telling the disciples and us that we need not play this game either. Here, Jesus tells us something deeply true about the one who made the universe. This is not a god like the other gods. No, this God is different. This is the God who deals with people—with all people—with loving benevolence, who refuses to deal with us according to *our sins* but instead deals with us according to *God's grace*. This God fills heaven and earth, says the prophet Jeremiah. When we are in this God, when we are connected to this God, there is no over and against because there is nowhere God is not.

¹ James Alison, *Broken Hearts and New Creations*, 165.

When Jesus stands among the disciples, bursting through their locked doors, not to take vengeance against those who abandoned him but to declare his peace to them, he inaugurated those first Christians into a different way of being in this world. Because God dealt gracefully with them, they were freed from the sorts of the vengeful games the world taught them, free to deal gracefully with all others.

And we, these centuries later, stand also in the midst of Christ. Christ bursts through our own locked doors, stands among us and says, “This is my body, given for you.” “This is my grace, given to you in these waters.” “This is my peace: you don’t need to be over and against anybody, just as I am never over and against you.”

And yes, Jesus’s warning is correct. Living this way of peace, putting down our swords, won’t stop all of our siblings from acting in all the old ways—it doesn’t even stop us from always living in those old ways. But we continue to come to these waters, back to this table, back to this place where we speak of our frailty and our weakness and our need, and hear this one answer us: “My Peace I leave with you. My grace I leave with you. My love I leave with you. You are my child, and you are Beloved. And that’s all you ever need to be.” Amen.