Stephen's Stoning: How to be an Ally Ken Wilson January 1, 2017

Heard of Boxing Day? Day after X-mas, observed in Canada, South Africa, U.K. Originally, referred to boxing up gifts for the milkman and other service workers. But traditions degrade, and Boxing Day came to refer to people boxing up their unwanted X-mas gifts to get a refund at the store. The second law of thermodynamics applied to religious customs ☺

The day after X-mas also St. Stephen's Day. Here's where it gets more relevant to the times where in. The church calendar people had an intuition that after X-mas, such a kid-friendly holiday, we needed to sober up a little and understand what Jesus coming into the world was up to. Enter St. Stephen who earned his day by getting stoned (as in to death.)

Rene Girard, who studied ancient myths, says the oldest means of restraining violence is an **unconscious crowd mechanism** called scapegoating. Intense rivalries fuel tit-for-tat escalations. As conflicts multiply, the viability of the group is threatened. Enter the scapegoat mechanism: accusations circulate and eventually focus on a single person or sub-group. The all-against-all morphs into an all-against-one. A stoning/ lynching/expulsion follows, resolving tensions…for a while.

Authoritarian leaders, demagogues, and wanna-be dictators get their start by manipulating a crowd's unconscious tendency to resolve tension by scapegoating. Such leaders are bullies, accusing one group after another until the mob finally organizes against one of them. When a national leader gains power by turning crowds against the Press, Muslims, immigrants and other groups, you know that a scapegoating crisis is afoot. Because it's an unconscious mechanism, attempts to scapegoat are only thwarted when the mechanism is exposed.

STEPHEN'S STONING IS A PRIMER IN SCAPEBOAT DYNAMICS

Stephen emerges in a context of rivalry-fueled tensions—the petri-dish for scapegoating: ***Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.*** (Acts 6: 1-2)

At this stage, all the Jesus followers are Jewish, with two main factions, Aramaic speaking Jews (Hebrews) and Greek-speaking or Hellenized Jews: One ethnicity, two cultures > big tensions.

Stephen, full of grace &power, did great wonders & signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, [Note: Christianity began as an Easter religion among People of Color, not in an all white suburb like Livonia] ***stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke*** (Acts 6: 8-10)

Among Greek-speaking Jews, there were **several sub-groups**, at least 4 mentioned here, presumably with their own tensions. But, as happens, they are united by turning together on Stephen, a leader of another sub-group, the new Jewish-Jesus sect.

<u>These multiplying tensions set the stage for scapegoating</u>: ***Then they secretly instigated some men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. They set up false witnesses who said, "This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us."*** (Acts 6: 11-14)

If **multiplying conflict**s is the breeding ground for scapegoating, then the **contagion of accusation** triggers the mechanism.

<u>First, a behind-the-scenes group has an axe to grind</u>. They get someone else to surface accusations more openly. Accusations spread to the elites (in this case, elders & scribes) until the accused is brought before an investigative committee.

This is the first century version of the **House Un-American Activities Committee, during the Cold-War McCarthy era**. Scapegoats in any era are always accused of something **unpatriotic**, as was Stephen.

And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. (Acts 6: 13-15)

This is *intense scrutiny*. The staring mob.

<u>Members of a targeted minority understand what **scrutiny** is like.</u> When a crowd *stares* at you, it's never good. the black man walking with a white woman thru a crowd knows this. The trans person going into a public restroom, the woman with the hijab on subway, the gay couple holding hands in public, all know this.

Things are getting quite dangerous for Stephen at this point. So what does he do in the face of all that intimidation? He **speaks u**p.

Stephen wasn't first disciple to draw negative attention. The Jesus movement was born in negative attention. But something is coming to a head now and Stephen makes a bold move: a speech

The heart of Christian discipleship is bearing witness. The risks of discipleship are speaking-up risks.

Stephen's speech, longer than even long-winded Paul (who put a man, then raised him from the dead when he fell off his ledge) is an object lesion in how religious people catch scapegoating fever. The speech features heroes of old Joseph, Moses, prophets—all driven out by their own people. But God was on their side. God is always with the victims, but the rest of us often participate in the scapegoating rather than exposing it.

In his rise to power, 1936, Hitler, who despised Christianity, met with a Cardinal of Church to say, "Nationalism and religion won't survive without each other." Despite early resistance to his rise, the vast majority of Christians went along with Hitler's program. True in Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy, in our own American scapegoating of People of Color, Jews, Catholics. During the Joe McCarthy era, it wasn't a Muslim Registry but a blacklist of "communist sympathizers" (supported by Billy Graham and many other religious leaders.) Nothing new, here. Business as usual.

Religion at its worst is part of the scapegoating mob
Religion at its best stands with the victims.

[And let's be absolutely clear: this was a fierce disagreement *within* Judaism. This was not the persecution of Gentiles by the Jews. Given the deep anti-Semitism that has marked so much of Gentile-dominated Christianity through the ages, it's important that we not use a text like (as has happened in the past) to vilify the Jewish people. If anything, the Jewish people, were the first to identify and expose the scapegoat mechanism, the first to break free of it. Every religion, including Christianity has participated, unwittingly in scapegoating others. It is a great shame, and tragegy, and the height of perversity, that in the history of the church, Gentile Christians used their new-found power to turn against their Jewish brethren and scapegoat them.]

When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see the heavens

opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died" (Acts 7: 54-60)

Happy Boxing Day! Some take-a-ways…

When a scapegoating crisis develops, we need to be ***filled with the Spirit.*** The scapegoating mob is in a hypnotic bubble, blind to what's going on. Outrage is not adequate to counter this mob-spirit. Passing memes to our like-minded FB friends is not an adequate response. We need to be filled with the Spirit to see what Jesus is up to.

"But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Look he said, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!"

What did Stephen see? He saw Jesus ***standing***, not sitting.

<u>The common locution is "sitting at the right hand of God"</u> (Creed: *He ascended into heaven where he is seated at the right hand of God*.) But the Jesus Stephen sees is standing not sitting.

When the **Queen of England** is sitting on her throne, she doesn't stand to receive visitors. She retains her position of honor. If she does stand when a guest arrives, she is honoring the guest.

<u>Jesus, who was scapegoated himself, is honoring Stephen even as</u> Stephen is dishonored by the mob. **Stephen is pointing this out** to the mob: *you all feel like God is on your side, not so*!

<u>This is important. During a developing scapegoating crisis, those</u> being targeted need **allies**. Stephen could have used some allies. Allies are people who enjoy whatever privilege the crowd has. Allies are often of the same ethnicity/social class/ as the mob.

Remember, there are two key figures in this stoning, Stephen, of course, but also a new actor in this drama: Saul of Tarsus, introduced to us at the very end of the stoning of Stephen. Saul was a Greek-speaking Jew, and he could have been a powerful ally, but he didn't step into that role, until after his revelation later in Acts.

Eventually, Saul/Paul used his religious privilege, his ethnic privilege to stand up for the targeted people. He took some big hits for them.

But there are two ways to be an ally. One is **condescending**: *I am a powerful person, and I'm going to protect you poor vulnerable minority group.* That just perpetuates the dishonoring of the targeted group by the scapegoating mob.

The other way to be an ally is to have this spiritual vision: **to see Son of Man standing** to honor the targeted group. So, in imitation of Jesus, you stand too, you *honor* the targeted group.

There's a **huge difference** between **pity** (*you poor vulnerable people*) and **honor**. The targeted group knows the difference.

The default position of the privileged ally is to see themselves as a **protector**—which places the ally above the targeted group. But this spiritual vision changes that, changes you. The Holy Spirit changes you.

You're not seeing yourself as the solution. You're seeing something else. You're seeing Jesus standing to honor his comrades, those who like him, have been targeted. If you see the Son of Man standing to honor the targeted group, you will want to stand to honor them, to stand with, not over them.

In the days ahead I think we'll be learning how to do this. As various groups are targeted (press, Muslim, immigrants, POC, LGBT) we'll learn how to stand together: those who are targeted standing with those who are not and all of us standing with each other. All of us listening to each other, learning from each other, and supporting each other.

But as we do, it is important to realize that, though this is playing out in the **political** sphere, we're not to be inspired, moved, by a political spirit. Saying that, I don't mean to discourage political activity. To contrary, get involved. Get a group of friends together monthly to talk about how to support each other and those who are targeted for scapegoating. Run for office, engage in the political process, all that.

But this is not fundamentally a political process. This process is as old as the hills, it goes back to Cain and his kin, blaming his troubles on Abel, and getting rid of him to found society as a Scapegoating Enterprise.

We are in the realm, the zone, of the Spirit here.

There's a phrase that lets you know you are in the realm of Spirit: it's "over our heads"

Remember the Rev. Doctor, Martin Luther King Jr. He didn't set himself up as a leader in the Civil Rights Movement. He was the new pastor of a church in Birmingham, AL. When the bus boycott got started, the early organizers needed a place to meet in, so they approached King and he made his church available. Before long, he found himself leading the boycott. And he and his family began to receive death threats—late night phone calls threatening to fire-bomb his house, menacing people driving by. Late one night, it got to him. He sat down with a cup of coffee then laid his head on the kitchen table and prayed as he had never prayed before. Remember King was an intellectual. He came into faith as man of letters, a scholar. He wasn't a Pentecostal, loaded up with a lot of spiritual experience. But that night he had his first divine encounter as he prayed, like this: ***people are looking to me…I'm at the end of my powers. I've got nothing left…I've come to the point where I can't face it alone"***

He lifted his heart toward a higher power, and that's when he heard the Voice in his heart for the first time: *Don't back down now. Stand Martin. I'm with you.*

What he was doing in that moment is what Stephen was doing in his crisis moment: **facing and embracing his own human predicament,** his own mortality, his vulnerability.

<u>When things are over your head, what do you do? Look up</u>!
Lift up your heart to a Higher Power. If that Power is standing with you and standing for you, you're going to be just fine.

QUIET REFLECTION

Let's give some space for the Spirit to work in our hearts now.

First, let's relax in our seat, close our eyes, and let me suggest that we begin by gathering up our limitations as human beings, our vulnerabilities—not our strength, but our weakness. And just sit with that, picturing God present to us in that state.

Let's do that now and be quiet together for a minute.

Now I invite you to do use your imagination to picture what Stephen saw when he was so obviously over his head and vulnerable: the son of Man, this glorious figure, normally seated in a place of great power and honor, standing to honor all those who are, like he was, subjected to accusations, scrutiny, hostility with a religious component….

Lift up your heart, and that in for minute.

Amen.