

David's Lowest & Greatest Moment

First death in Bible was a family murder—Cain, driven by envy, killed his brother, Abel. Genesis laments cycle of violence that consumed early humanity. Without laws, courts, police, how do you interrupt one violent deed begetting another like a contagion?

One theory says we humans kill our own more than other species kill their own because of our greater **imitative** ability. This capacity to imitate super-charges our learning curve (think how a child learns complex language skills). But we also unconsciously **imitate** each other's **desire**. Which leads to trouble.

We want what others want because they want it. This leads to **rivalry**, which leads to **violence**. And because we imitate so well, when one lashes out in violence, we respond in kind and violence spreads like a **contagion** that threatens to destroy everyone.

Early humans stumbled into a powerful way to contain violence, called **scapegoat mechanism**. As a community enters a crisis (e.g., drought or plague) rivalry increases and violence threatens to burn thru whole group. The community **instinctively & unconsciously** looks for a **person (or sub-group) to blame** for the crisis. It forms a unanimous mob around the victim, and stones-lynches them, forces them off a cliff. Immediately, all **individual rivalries-conflicts resolve** and they enter a period of **remarkable peace**. When rivalries-violence build up again, pattern repeats.

Scapegoating is a **violent means of containing violence**, fueled by **rivalry**, fueled by **imitation**. It's a murder based on a lie—the guilt of the victim. It **persists** because it works to restrain violence.

When we scapegoat others, we are **blissfully unaware** of what we're doing since it only works if innocence of victim is hidden

I was 9th Gr. Class President, campaign manager, Gary. In senior year, people assumed I would be class president, but I couldn't run because I didn't have a 3.0. Gary ran instead. I was part of a group that urged Dan to run. Dan missed get-on-ballot deadline, so we organized a write-in campaign. He got more votes, but disallowed.

Gary was odd-man-out among other class officers, all female athletes. They started complaining about him covertly. A group of us said, *start a recall campaign*. Inexplicably, faculty advisor supported this effort (tight with other officers) and she called a class meeting to raise complaints about Gary. (No one ever talked to Gary). It was horrible...he ended up **resigning**.

At time, I was oblivious to injustice of it all. Unaware of my rivalry with, envy toward Gary, or how a scapegoating mob can form quickly--assuming guilt of victim without much evidence. (Reached out to Gary via FB, we got together for dinner and I owned it.)

Series on leadership based on life of King David. Late in his reign David was scapegoated. In scapegoat theory, people who are different from group are prime candidates, but leaders are also vulnerable. It was the **lowest moment** in his career but his **greatest moment** as a leader. **Here's how it went down....**

Saul was Israel's first king. Prophet Samuel identified David as God's man. Full of envy, Saul turned on David, who went into hills, where others joined him. David had opportunities to kill Saul but refused. Waited until Saul died, then took over. Moved from **Hebron** to a small place called **Jerusalem**, which became capital.

David's family was rife with rivalry. David's first-born **Amnon** raped his sister **Tamar**, which incensed Tamar's other brother **Absalom**. David ignored Amnon's crime. Absalom eventually had Amnon murdered. **So there were some family issues.**

David's son Absalom became his chief rival. Absalom worked to gain the people's favor while spreading complaints about his father's leadership. It worked. Absalom set up a power base in Hebron, outside Jerusalem, and prepared a **coup**.

As Absalom and his supporters advanced against Jerusalem, David decided to leave, not fight. He and his entourage left his palace and we find them weeping on the way to the **Mount of Olives** (where Jesus went on night of his betrayal by Judas, working in collusion with leaders who were jealous of Jesus' popularity)

Then the lowest point: **2 Samuel 16: 5-14.**

Step Back: In book of Samuel, David has God's backing despite his many faults. He is innocent. He is being scapegoated. Absalom has been saying it's better for one man to die than for the whole nation to go down the tubes. **Logic of scapegoating:** Caipahas

Samuel text is doing something remarkable for its time in history—**revealing innocence** of **victims** of scapegoating. **Rene Girard** says the Bible is **unique** in this regard. All ancient myths of the period **assume guilt of the victim**, whose death restores peace to group.

Remember: scapegoat mechanism *contained violence* but it would only work when everyone assumed guilt of the victim. So there was a **culture of conspiracy to hide the innocence** of victims.

Ancient myths were all told from the perspective of the lynchers. The victims were always **assumed to be guilty**. In medieval stories about the plague, the Jews or a woman charged with witchcraft were blamed, and their guilt was always assumed. *All ancient writings assumed the guilt of victims.* **Except**, says Girard, the **Bible**, written from perspective of the lynched not the lynchers.

So that's remarkable. But notice too how David breaks cycle of violence sweeping thru the city as rivalries are unleashed.

Shimei (shim-ee-eye) from clan of Saul (rivals to David) comes out to **curse** David. Jesus tied cursing to murder. It's verbal violence. **Throwing stones** evokes the **common way to dispatch** scapegoats. Shimei, heaps abuse on David in name of a **god of vengeance**. In Bible when someone claims God is punishing someone else (like Job's comforters) they are usually wrong. The person making the claim is full of vengeance, not God.

David bodyguards says, "Let me take this dog's head off" David says, *no...who knows? Shimei might be right.* (Scapegoating is so powerful even victims sometimes buy into story of their own guilt)

Whether David thinks he's guilty or not is beside point. Point is, he knows **God is on the side of the victim**, not the scapegoating mob: ***"It may be the Lord will look on my distress and the Lord will repay me with good for this cursing of me today."***

Eventually David was restored, but he knew that fighting back would only inflame more violence. Instead, he broke the cycle of violence by refusing to fight for his rightful place. An act of leadership that saved his city.

This is the way of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: forgive, do good to those who harm you, don't seek vengeance, bless those who curse you, turn other cheek. Violence only begets violence, begets more violence. Non-violence alone breaks the cycle.

Jesus himself endured his own scapegoating event, and like David, he didn't fight it. He left it in God's hands, and God came through big-time by **raising** him up—**unmasking** scapegoating mechanism.

As a result, scapegoating is losing its power.... Which means restraining violence with more violence is running out of steam as a mechanism to restore peace.

What's the alternative? Kingdom of God: We have to face our own envy. We have to learn how to bless when we are cursed, to forgive, to love even our enemies. This will be a long, slow, process, working itself out in history.

Our minority brothers & sisters (racial/ethnic minorities/LGBT)

know what it's like to be scapegoated. All of us may get our chance if we stand with them. Speaking up for Muslims after a terror attack, or for LGBT, or against the scapegoating antics of politicians may affect our standing in our family.

Scapegoating happens at work. Your company may suffer loss of market share from a new competitor. People will start blaming each other, rivalries intensify. Maybe the group will coalesce around you as the cause of the company's problems. In that low moment, how do you respond? Shift the blame to someone else? Seek vengeance? Keep cycle of violence going? Or follow path of Jesus: *"Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing"*

God of Bible is the God of the victim. The persecuted minorities and those who stand with them, are ones who have the privilege of bearing witness to kingdom of God by practicing non-violence.

Interview in NYT of members of Immanuel AME Church in Charleston. One year ago, June 17, 9 African Americans killed by white American fueled by racial hatred.

No sugar-coating one year later. But so striking—members of Immanuel AME were struggling, not to get even but to forgive. [Read] What a powerful witness to way of Jesus, kingdom of God.

A year later: it's 50 this time, mostly young, LGBT people of color. Killer was filled—it seems—with self-hatred because he was gay in a homophobic culture. This may have been a mass murder suicide with a veneer of ISIS terrorism as a cover. We don't know. We do know: our task is not to join chorus crying out for more **vengeance**, led by the Shim-ee-eyes our time. **The time for fighting violence with more violence is passing away.** We are called to **participate in the new reality** called Kingdom of God.

We are called to follow way of Jesus, the innocent victim who rose from dead **to reveal the innocence of everyone scapegoated** from the foundation of the world. We join his prayer for scapegoaters: *"Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."*

Prayer for people killed in Orlando: 50 in all. I decided to include the name of the killer to honor the people of Immanuel AME church who are struggling to forgive the man who killed their loved ones. If they can try, we can try.