Envy, Rivalry and Violence: Scapegoats Anonymous
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REVIEW: first spent some time on the hidden role of imitative desire in our tendency toward violence. We imitate each other, and that’s the key to our success. As children, we learn complex language simply by imitating those around us. Our imitation is automatic, un-self-conscious. We don’t just imitate external gestures & behavior. We also imitate the desires of others. We see someone wanting something and we want it too. This sets us up for intense rivalries, leading to conflict, and conflict is just imitated aggression. (We’re oblivious to the fact that we imitate people we are in conflict with. We imitate their aggression)

Early human groups survived tendency for violence to spiral out of control through scapegoating. Scapegoating is a survival mechanism for communities threatened by escalating internal conflicts. It works by channeling the conflicts of the many against the one or the few. Nothing is so unifying as a good enemy. Rene Girard, who developed scapegoat theory, says this is the foundation of human society, religion, culture, the works. Without the scapegoating mechanism, humans would have killed each other off long ago and gone extinct. (At one point human population was down to 2K individuals on Southern tip of Africa.) A scapegoat is an innocent victim thought to be guilty by the crowd. But scapegoating only works when the innocence of the victim is hidden, when crowd assumes the guilt of the person designated as the source of the community’s ills. Many similarities between many of the stories in the Bible and ancient myths. Well documented. One striking difference: in ancient myths the guilt of the person or group killed or excluded always assumed. The person got what he deserved. Like Oedipus—he was the cause of the plague in Thebes because he killed his father and slept with his mother, so he was driven out and the plague stopped. The gift of the Jews to humanity is unmasking of the scapegoat mechanism. For the first time in history, the people killed or excluded (Abel in the Cain and Abel story, Joseph sold into slavery by his brothers) are understood to be innocent. Emily, who put me on to this, will show how the death and resurrection of Jesus is the culmination of the unmasking of the scapegoat mechanism designed to bring it to an end. But as we learn how scapegoating works, today I want to point out the main takeaway for us. It’s not: O my Lord, see how I have been scapegoated! That has a place. Victims
internalize the accusations of the crowd. Unmasking the scapegoat mechanism helps victims to realize that what’s been done to them is unjust. The more significant takeaway is to understand how easy it is to participate in scapegoating unwittingly. In the NT, the featured conversion stories are of two figures: Peter, the lead disciple, and Paul, the Pharisee. Both, in their own ways, were unwittingly drawn into participation with the scapegoating crowd. Today, Peter. Set the stage: In gospels, Israel was in a state of intense rivalry and escalating violence. Not just in rivalry with their Roman occupiers, but also with each other. Communities under intense stress of any kind are vulnerable to turning on each other. Israel wracked by intense internal rivalries: zealots vs. moderates, Sadducees vs. the Pharisees, peasants vs. aristocracy. Disciples of Jesus had their internal rivalries: who is the greatest? All these internal conflicts are about to trigger the scapegoat mechanism. In John 11, Caiaphas, high priest, said to the ruling council trying to decide what to do about Jesus: “Don’t you realize it’s better for one man to suffer, than for the whole nation to perish?” Look, the Romans are nervous about messianic movements. We can leverage this if we cooperate with them in the case of Jesus. It’s in the nation’s best interest. Leaders often go along with scapegoating for what seems a noble reason: to preserve the institutions that they lead. In John, chapter 18, we find Peter and another disciple tag along behind Jesus after he is arrested. Jesus is the innocent victim thought to be guilty, in the process of being scapegoated. So the soldiers, their officer, and the Jewish police arrested Jesus and bound him. 13 First they took him to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. 14 Caiaphas was the one who had advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people. 15 Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Since that disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest, but Peter was standing outside at the gate. So the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out, spoke to the woman who guarded the gate, and brought Peter in. 17 The woman said to Peter, “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?” He said, “I am not.” 18 Now the slaves and the police had made a charcoal fire because it was cold, and they were standing around it and warming themselves. Peter also was standing with them and warming himself.
JN. 18: 12-18
Peter and the other disciple (probably John) are following Jesus with the intention to support him. They love him. They are for him. They don’t think he is guilty of any crimes that deserve arrest, imprisonment, and certainly not death. Peter is frightened, cold, and tired. It’s a brave thing he’s doing, getting this close to the authorities who have arrested Jesus. Peter is an accomplice to Jesus from the Roman perspective. So he’s taking a risk being this close to the authorities. And yet, standing around the fire to warm himself, he denies knowing Jesus when he is recognized. He doesn’t say, “This man is innocent of these trumped up charges!” He says, “You’re crazy! I’ve got nothing to do with this man!”

In order for a community to transfer its internal conflicts to a scapegoat, you first need a small faction accusing an individual or group as the source of the community’s ills. But you also need many more people to passively go along with the accusers--either by remaining silent or by distancing themselves from the scapegoated individual or group. Peter’s denial is entirely predictable and understandable. The fire surrounded by people warming themselves is a picture of community. It represents our basic human need for the warmth and acceptance-approval of the crowd. When our community, that we depend on for our warmth and survival, turns against an innocent victim, it becomes a majority-mob, a crowd, a scape-goating community, doing what communities with multiplying rivalries and conflicts always do in order to survive. And power of this, pulls us, hypnotizes us, intoxicates us, and the desire of the crowd becomes our desire. We get swept along. Grew up segregated Detroit 1950-60’s. Compared to my white friends (all my friends-neighbors were white) I was racially enlightened. My dad, raised in lily white racist Dearborn, was a member of NAACP. I came home from first grade using “N” word and my mother sharply rebuked me. But I grew up surrounded by people who told jokes about the Japs, WOPS, Krauts, Spics and Coloreds—it was everywhere. My first father-in-law was a man of his time: he told racist jokes, like so many people in that time. I did not have an auspicious beginning with my late wife Nancy’s family. We got married at 18 for usual reason. I did not want to further rock the boat. When my father-in-law told one his jokes, what was I supposed to do? Say, “Dad, I do not want to hear those jokes!” Actually yes, that’s what I was supposed to do. But I was afraid to spend my already depleted equity in that way. So I deflected at times. I pretended not to hear at
times. There were probably times when I faked a chuckle, with my mother’s voice ringing in my ears, “We do not use that word in this house!” Eventually Nancy and I got up the gumption to say, please stop it. And he did. But it took some time to work up the nerve. Why did I do that, against my own values and upbringing? Because I was like Peter, let into the courtyard, frightened, insecure, warming myself by the fire. We are wired to seek the approval/acceptance of circle gathered around the fire and sometimes we’ll do anything to get it. If that means being silent, we’ll be silent. If it means distancing ourselves from the scapegoats, we’ll do it, especially if we are cold enough and tired enough and frightened enough. SIDE NOTE: If we are Americans of European ancestry, it does not reassure our African-American brothers & sisters to say, “I am not a racist.” Racism is a toxin in our cultural water supply. Every human has PCB’s in their bloodstream from plastic in the water, including children in the womb. Racism is a toxin in our bloodstream. So don’t say, “I am not a racist.” Say, “I want to be free of racism, God helping me. I’m committed to that project.”

Rene Girard talks about a kind of crowd contagion that takes over when a group of people unconsciously projects its many internal conflicts onto a single victim or minority group in order to put the brakes on intensifying rivalries with the group. Girard describes this as a kind of hypnotic effect...our familiar term is mob mentality. People in groups can become kinder or meaner depending on group dynamics driven by imitation.

Have you ever found yourself laughing in a group of people and someone whispers in your ear, “What was said? What was so funny?” and you realize you didn’t hear either but you’re just laughing because everyone else is laughing? It’s awkward. You feel busted. You don’t want to admit that you are laughing because everyone else is laughing. We unconsciously and automatically imitate others and things spread through groups because of this.

If Peter, who loved Jesus as much as he did, who left his fishing business and family to follow Jesus, could be affected in this way, well hello, welcome to the human race, we can to. We are the sort of people who are entirely capable of participating in scapegoating, if only by our silence, by our standing at the edge of crowd pretending that what’s going on is not really going on. And guess what? We
are loved by God being these sorts of people. By loved I mean, also, liked. The words Jesus said to God about us are not, “Look at these cowards!” The words that Jesus said to God about us are “Father, forgive them because they don’t know what they are doing.” We are never more ignorant about what we are actually doing than when we are swept into the hypnotic contagion of a crowd that is resolving its internal tensions by scapegoating someone. So take heart! Ignorance can be corrected. All it takes is a little light. And Jesus is going around turning the lights on in our hearts, one little light switch at a time.

SILENT REFLECTION

Let’s work with the image of a light switch turned on in a dark room. Turning on a light switch is easy. Finding it can be hard.

Imagine waking up in a pitch-dark room that is completely unfamiliar to you. Turning on light switch is easy, finding it hard. What would really be helpful is for someone who knows where the light switch is to come into the room and turn it on for you.

Theoretically, we all have blind spots. We infer that because we can see the glaring blind spots of everyone else, just not, be definition, our own. Because they are blind spots, we don’t know where the light switch in the dark room is located. For the next minute or so, take a bemused posture to that reality. Not a condemning posture, a bemused posture. Relax into the knowledge that you have blind spots. Once you’re relaxed about it, simply tell God who has seen all your blind spots for a long time and still likes you, who has spoken forgiveness over you in your ignorance…that you think you might be ready to have him step into one of them and flip the light switch. Not right now…but to sneak up and turn a switch sometime in the near future. And then be alert for it when it comes.