Envy, Rivalry, and Violence: Saul’s Pivot Moment  Ken Wilson

[FORGIVENESS SERIES/BOOK]

Jesus often said to those steeped in Scripture, “Tell me, how do you read it?” He understood we use many different lenses to read Scripture. Which lens? Is what interests him. Do we read Scripture to gain or keep power over people or to love as Jesus loved?

9 weeks on Rene Girard’s Scapegoat Theory because it’s a powerful Jesus-centered lens, a lens generated by Scripture itself.

Today use this lens to understand meaning of Paul’s conversion.

Scapegoat theory is a prism-lens with 5 aspects:
Imitation/Desire/Rivalry/Contagious Violence/Scapegoating

We are imitative creatures. We pick up desires by unconscious imitation of others, which sets us up for intense rivalries. When a community in crisis, imitative rivalry fuels contagious violence through a crowd. This triggers the scapegoat mechanism: a group channels its many conflicts on a single individual or a few. Their exclusion restores harmony to the many until the next crisis...

Hebrew Bible culminating in NT, departs from all ancient myth because it doesn’t go along with the guilt of victims. Instead it sides with the victims, unmasking the scapegoat mechanism.

We said 2 models of Christian conversion NT are PETER & PAUL. Very different stories share two important features.

First: both were part of scapegoating mob, but thru an encounter with risen Jesus they left the mob.

Second feature: is powerful moment when their own participation in the scapegoating mob was unmasked—pivot of conversion.

Read of Peter in Jn 18, standing around charcoal fire in high priest courtyard, Jesus nearby, being interrogated after his arrest. 3X Peter denies knowing Jesus to avoid losing his place around the fire. Like we are prone to do: standing by rather than standing up for victims to keep our standing in the group.

Here’s crucial detail in Luke, just after 3rd denial: “The Lord turned to Peter and looked straight at Peter and Peter remembered the Lord’s words, ‘Before a rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.’ And Peter went out and cried uncontrollably.”

That’s when he realized: oh no! I’ve been sucked into scapegoating mob! What have I done! I’m on the wrong side of history!

Fascinating, this is only in Luke. Because it corresponds to similar moment in the conversion of Saul, in Acts, also written by Luke.

Let me set this up.
After Jesus’ ascension (a physicist might say he entered a parallel dimension) gospel begins to spread first among/from population of Jerusalem Jews whose main language is Aramaic. Because of their ties to Jesus, they are vulnerable to scapegoating mob, and apostles have some close calls, but a powerful leader, Gamaliel intervenes and they escape. Because very first disciples are native speakers they had more connections with powerful people and it paid off. (John known by household of high priest)

Action shifts to Greek-speaking Jews living in Jerusalem They are more vulnerable to being scapegoated because native tongue is Greek, not Aramaic. No accident a Greek-speaking disciple becomes first scapegoat/martyr. Name is Stephen.

Precursor to scapegoating is a crisis marked by intensifying rivalries and we have it. Non-messianic leaders in rivalry with messianic leaders, and new-forming church wracked with intensifying rivalry between its Aramaic & Greek speakers. Apostles (native speakers) step in and insist Greek speakers select seven leaders. They all have Greek names including Stephen.

Stephen “stood out” among this group due to his healing gift. Standing out from the crowd makes you a target for scapegoating.

Ruling council (stymied in efforts to scapegoat native speakers) targets Stephen from the non-Greek speaking faction. He is hauled before them when local synagogue goes into crisis mode and starts to turn on him. Saul of Tarsus (Paul) is like part of this synagogue, since he is also a Greek speaking Jew.

Stephen has no powerful protector like Gamaliel and the ruling council shows early signs of forming into a scapegoating mob.

Stephen addresses them in a speech that features how Joseph was scapegoated by his brothers but God was with Joseph, and how Moses expelled by his Jewish community in Egypt...and how they did the same to Jesus, which causes them to “grind their teeth” and they rise up against Stephen and send him outside where a larger mob stones him, relieving all that tension.

Following the lead of Jesus, Stephen dies with these words: Don’t hold this sin against them reminding us of Jesus last words, “Father forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing [the case with all scapegoaters]”

Saul is present at this, as a behind-the-scenes ringleader.

Then Saul has his moment, equivalent to Peter in Luke’s gospel where Jesus looks at Peter, aligned with the scapegoating mob.

In that moment, described in Luke, Peter’s heart breaks wide open and he is reduced to uncontrollable sobbing as his own participation in the scapegoating mob is unmasked.

Now Paul’s moment, Acts 9: 1-6: Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. ³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why
do you persecute me?”  

5 He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.  

6 But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”

Later in Acts, we learn this happened around noon. Jews, like Muslims today, and monks in monasteries, observed fixed hour prayer. Noon was one of those times. Probably praying psalms, most common content of these prayers. And the psalms are filled with the cry of persecuted victims (like Ps 71 read today)

Something triggered a vision, a light flashing in him.....and then these words, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?”

When Peter saw Jesus looking at him after third denial, he saw Jesus in a position of extreme vulnerability. (If you’ve ever been arrested and interrogated you know what that feels like).

To see someone’s vulnerability is to see their humanity.

It’s the humanity of the scapegoated that we fail to see. Everything we do to justify excluding them has to do with obscuring the humanity of the scapegoated community.

In the 1950’s when African American men began organized protests against Jim Crow laws, carried signs saying “I am a man”

In Peter’s case, Jesus is on his way to his death, but in Paul’s case it is the risen Jesus having conquered death...and yet, Jesus is revealing, again, his vulnerability.

Saul, Saul [note plaintive repetition] Why are you persecuting me?

Jesus is speaking as a victim here, as one being injured by Saul.

Saul might have said, “I haven’t laid a hand on you!” He doesn’t. As a Jewish man, familiar with Hebrew Scriptures-traditions, he knew YHWH was the God who hears the cry and takes the side of the victims, whether Abel, Joseph, Hagar, Tamar, or Job!

If people that he was rounding up were victims, not perpetrators then he knew in a flash that he was on wrong side of God/history.

Saul hadn’t seen Jesus followers as victims but as perpetrators. He is protecting good-pious people from bad people who were victimizing the good people. He had it exactly bass-ackwards.

Scapegoaters always ignorant of their scapegoating. It’s telling that model scapegoater in NT was a man who used his misreading of Scripture to victimize people he never regarded as victims. Who saw himself as a victim, purging Israel of its perpetrators.

American society is extremely anxious right now because a large portion of white males see themselves as victims compared to other groups. A majority think racism/sexism are a thing of past.
As a white male I didn’t have a 1 in 4 chance of being sexually assaulted in college. My dad got a mortgage under the GI Bill. Of first 67,000 mortgages given out, 100 were for non-whites.

I’ve never been questioned by police for no reason. Only time my car was pulled over to be searched by border guards at Windsor bridge was when I was w/ an African American friend. White men suffer because they are human beings, not because of their race/gender. When people in power see themselves as an aggrieved victim group, a recipe for scapegoating.

Saul’s conversion was triggered when the risen Jesus presented himself to Saul as a vulnerable victim in solidarity with all victims.

Thereafter Saul left the scapegoating mob, stopped accusing and started defending victims.

Hugely significant shift, from accuser to defender! It signals Saul’s transfer from the realm of Satan to the realm of the Spirit.

“Satan” means accuser. Term describes hidden dynamic of scapegoating mob, always triggered/fueled by accusations against innocent victims, thought to be guilty.

Remove the power of accusation and you’ve undone Satan.

NT term for HS (context of scapegoating of Jesus): “paraclete” Gk. for defense counsel. Maintaining innocence of victims.

We move from the realm of Satan to the realm of the Spirit when we abandon accusation and embrace defense of victims.

That would be a fun series, no? Maybe 2017…

QUIET REFLECTION

Bring this down to interior-personal level. First minute identify a group of people you have secret fears about, or harbor anger toward, or feel uncomfortable around.

Next minute: ask Spirit (defense counsel) to arrange circumstances over next week or so to humanize that group for you---i.e. help you to see their vulnerability.