

“Name, Blame, Shame Game”

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3rd Sunday in Lent
1 Corinthians 1:18-25
John 2:13-22

*The Apostle Paul said,
[Judeans] ask for miracles, and Greeks want something that sounds wise.
But we preach that Christ was nailed to a cross.*

1 Corinthians 1:22-23

Let us pray... O God,
Help us to avoid the vicious cycle of looking for someone to blame
for what is wrong in the world.
Instead, help us kill our enemies with kindness and turn them into allies.

Amen

Our lesson today from the Gospel of John, describes the incident where
Jesus ‘cleanses’ the Temple of Jerusalem.

It is a relatively violent scene in which Jesus loses his cool
when he finds the outer courtyard of the Temple of Jerusalem
caught up in the commerce of ritual slaughter, and he says,
“Take these things away;
you shall not make my [Abba] Father’s house a house of trade.”

He drives out the moneychangers and those who were selling animals
for the big business of ritual sacrifice.

The text says he even used a whip made of cords to do this –
though this was more likely for the sheep and oxen rather than for people.

In the Revised Standard Version of this story, Jesus ‘pours’ out
the moneychangers’ coins – rather than scattering them,
and he overturns their tables, upsetting rather than destroying
their business operation, but sending the message just the same:
“You shall not make my [Abba] Father’s house a house of trade.”

The Cleansing of the Temple takes place at the beginning of the Gospel of John,
so it is established right from the beginning that

Jesus will be in confrontation with the religious authorities;
This foreshadows the ongoing antagonism between them
which will lead to Jesus’ crucifixion on a cross.

In the Synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke,
the Cleansing of the Temple takes place at the *end* of the story,
and serves as Jesus’ final provocation
for his enemies to arrest & condemn him.

Again, Jesus is disrupting the sanctified violence of ritualized slaughter
in a house of worship by interrupting the commerce of the powers that be.
Jesus is rescuing the sacrificial lambs, oxen, and doves
only to become a scapegoat himself...

Willard, p.2

However at the end of the Gospel of John, it is the Raising of Lazarus from death which finally provokes the high priests and Pharisees to act against Jesus. When the religious and political leaders of the Judeans can't explain this miracle, their delicate balance of power, while under Roman occupation, is threatened... When the high priests and Pharisees gather to figure out what to do, Caiaphas – who was High Priest of the Year, said, “It is better for one person to die than for the whole nation to be destroyed.”

This is an amazing statement, because it is also the formula for what theologian Rene Girard, calls the ‘single victim mechanism’, or ‘scapegoating’. It would seem that finding a scapegoat to punish and get rid of – rather than allow violence to escalate into a massacre, is practical. However, it is more often the case that the guilt of the scapegoat is often built upon pre-existing conditions of prejudice, therefore blinding the accuser to the possibility of the suspect’s innocence.

This whole scenario is the “Name, Blame, and Shame Game”, which brings to mind an old corporate joke called ‘the six phases of a big project’, that puts it like this:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Six_phases_of_a_big_project

1. *Enthusiasm*
2. *Disillusionment*
3. *Panic and hysteria*
4. *Search for the guilty*
5. *Punishment of the innocent*
6. *Praise and honor for the nonparticipants*

<http://wikibon.org/blog/this-project-management-joke-is-often-reality/>

It is a familiar cycle for avoiding corporate catastrophe – without implementing any real change.

This is a very real problem in life and very much a part of human behavior that even operates subconsciously in us.

Rene Girard was teaching college-level literature when he recognized certain concepts at work and began to develop his theories. ‘Mimetic desire’ – or the jealousy and competition that arises over wanting what others have, or even imitating them, desiring what they desire. This leads to competition that eventually breaks out into violence, spiraling out of control, which can only be stopped – it would seem, by finding someone to blame.

This is something that happens subconsciously, but also intentionally. It is a mechanism that could even be characterized as the ‘Original Sin’.

Willard, p. 3

Desire for the forbidden fruit of God's Garden led to Eve being accused by Adam, making her the first victim of the 'single victim mechanism.'

This "Name, Blame, Shame Game" gives rise to the 'Myth of Redemptive Violence', in which scapegoats are presumed to be the same as sacrificial lambs – though they are not the same.

The accuser may feel justified in sacrificing someone else, but self-righteousness is just part of the illusion that allows innocent people to be unjustly treated and even killed.

It is in response to this mechanism that Rene Girard believes Jesus Christ intentionally provoked the religious and political powers that be to expose this "Name, Blame, Shame Game" by allowing himself to become a scapegoat in order to be recognized as a true sacrifice for the sake of us all.

The Apostle Paul tells us that the wisdom of God sounds like foolishness to worldly people who would see the Crucifixion as a 'scandal'. However, this is what is meant by the Theology of the Cross – the heroic counter-myth where the victim courageously confronts their oppressor nonviolently and prevails despite death.

Violent persecution of vulnerable, innocent people has continued, but Jesus has given us a way to recognize it and choose not to participate. This has not meant passive submission, but active confrontation – nonviolently, to break the vicious cycle of naming, blaming, and shaming others. It has meant beginning to see confrontation does not necessarily mean following the path of anger, deception, and hatred that boils over into violence. It also means that the passion to fight for what is right can be effectively expressed nonviolently...

I had an opportunity to get on a bus to go to Tallahassee last Monday with about a hundred Villagers – mostly senior women, to peacefully demonstrate for our State legislature to act on gun control in response to the Parkland massacre.

That afternoon, we sat in on the State Senate Rules Committee hearing on proposed gun control legislation.

Now, there was some power politics going on as speakers were denied opportunities to speak, and amendments were voted down which

would have denied possession – and not just the sale of bump stocks, *would have* banned AR-15 assault rifles, and *would have* blocked arming teachers as school marshals.

The young people especially were furious, pointing and shouting, "Shame! Shame! Shame!" and "We'll Vote You Out!"

Willard, p.4

I found that I could not join them in that accusation... because it occurred to me that those intransigent senators are part of the solution – part of the problem and the solution.

It has become clear to me that there is no way to recover 325 million guns already privately-owned in the United States.

So the only way forward is for gun-owners to self-regulate and choose to disarm their fear and hatred.

The incidences of mass shootings are pervasive, so the responses must be comprehensive.

We need conservatives and progressives working together for common sense change on issues across the board.

This sounds political, but what I am saying is that we are faced with a moral and spiritual crisis of casting out the evil spirits of fear, deception, and hatred by praying with our hands & feet, and by being Jesus' eyes & ears & voice in this world.

We need to engage people we disagree with, avoiding trigger words, avoiding the Name, Blame, Shame Game, while inviting them to express their idea of what a better world would look like.

But then, you must be ready to speak up and offer your vision, too.

Remember that in Revelation 19:15^a, it says,

From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations...

The “sword of his mouth” are words –

they are the words of uncompromised truth, love & forgiveness.

They are the words each of us must speak to turn opponents into friends and together overcome evil with good.

Do you remember the parable that Jesus told about a sower who cast seeds freely upon all kinds of ground?

He then explained that parable to his disciples,

but he didn't tell them how the 'good soil' was to be prepared

to receive the seeds that were sown – to hear the Word of God.

He has left that for us to figure out how to break up the pavement, dig up the rocks, and pull up thorns and weeds by the roots

to prepare the ground of people's hearts

so they can hear words of hope from God through you.

[Judeans] ask for miracles, and Greeks want something that sounds wise.

But we preach that Christ was nailed to a cross. [1 Corinthians 1:22-23]

We preach that Christ was nailed to a cross and 17 people were killed by gun violence and we need to stop the Name, Blame, Shame Game

and speak the words of truth and love that turn enemies into allies.

Amen

*Our scripture lesson, 1st Corinthians 1:18-25 from the Common English Version,
speaks of the paradox of everyday 'common sense'
and the 'wisdom of the cross'...*

[The Apostle Paul said,]

¹⁸ The message about the cross doesn't make any sense to lost people.
But for those of us who are being saved, it is God's power at work.

¹⁹ As God says in the Scriptures,
"I will destroy the wisdom of all who claim to be wise.
I will confuse those who think they know so much."

²⁰ What happened to those wise people?
What happened to those experts in the Scriptures?
What happened to the ones who think they have all the answers?
Didn't God show that the wisdom of this world is foolish?

²¹ God was wise and decided not to let the people of this world
use their wisdom to learn about him.

Instead, God chose to save
only those who believe the foolish message we preach.

²² [Judeans] ask for miracles, and Greeks want something that sounds wise.
²³ But we preach that Christ was nailed to a cross.
Most [Judeans] have problems with this,
and most Gentiles think it is foolish.

²⁴ Our message is God's power and wisdom for the [Judeans] and the Greeks
that [God] has chosen.

²⁵ Even when God is foolish, [God] is wiser than everyone else,
and even when God is weak, [God] is stronger than everyone else.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

John 2:13-22

- ¹³ The Passover of the [Judeans] was at hand,
and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.
- ¹⁴ In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons,
and the money-changers at their business.
- ¹⁵ And making a whip of cords,
he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple;
and he poured out the coins of the money-changers
and overturned their tables.
- ¹⁶ And he told those who sold the pigeons,
“Take these things away;
you shall not make my Father’s house a house of trade.”
- ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it was written,
“Zeal for thy house will consume me.”
- ¹⁸ The [Judeans] then said to him,
“What sign have you to show us for doing this?”
- ¹⁹ Jesus answered them,
“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”
- ²⁰ The [Judeans] then said,
“It has taken forty-six years to build this temple,
and will you raise it up in three days?”
- ²¹ But he spoke of the temple of his body.
- ²² When therefore he was raised from the dead,
his disciples remembered that he had said this;
and they believed the scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken.