

The Scapegoat

A Sermon Preached to the House of Bishops

September 21, 2010

Last month I went to our cathedral fully expecting to be arrested. The cathedral congregation was hosting an early morning prayer vigil against the controversial anti-immigration bill SB1070. Our infamous sheriff, Joe Arpaio, had vowed on television the night before that anyone demonstrating against the law could expect to be jailed. To ensure this, he had ordered several hundred deputies to be on hand in full riot gear. So I knew what was coming. A friend who was a veteran of civil disobedience had advised me not to wear clothing I didn't want ruined and most important, to write the phone number of my lawyer in indelible ink on my forearm, since all my possessions would be confiscated upon arrest.

I was ready. And oddly, I felt strangely exhilarated. Maybe I had an overly romanticized idea of what it would be like to be persecuted for my faith, but I counted going to jail for something I believed in to be a badge of honor. Perhaps it was the thrill of actually *doing* something instead of just *talking* about it that I found a relief. As it turns out, I did not get a chance that day to join the chorus of prophets, priests, and martyrs, for try as I might, the police just weren't interested in me. I don't know if was the clerical collar or whether they had already reached their quota, but I was passed over.

But even if I didn't have a mugshot as souvenir of that morning's vigil, I did learn a lot. Being shoved around by a phalanx of men in blue, watching people waving American flags scream obscenities at brown children, seeing Mexican grandmothers being pelted with rotten eggs while praying at an outdoor shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, made me realize that this country is not in the midst of a controversy that will be rationally solved with arguments about constitutional justice or economic self-interest. When it comes to the immigration crisis, we are not debating politics, we are dealing with "principalities and powers," with the demonic forces of hatred and fear. That is not to say that constitutional arguments are not important. I am relieved that a federal judge decided that SB1070 is mostly unconstitutional. Yet we all know this will be merely a short respite in what is a growing national issue with many other state legislators poised to enact their own new and improved version of SB1070. On the economic side, too, the facts are clear—the Arizona economy has suffered greatly with millions of dollars of lost revenue and over 100,000 people who have moved out of the state in the last six months. It makes one wonder, why would the public support measures which are so blatantly detrimental to their own economic well-being?

Why would we as a country, a country built on a history of immigration, now decide to turn our back on our foundational belief in openness, opportunity, and a welcome for those "teaming masses yearning to breath free?" Fareed Zacaria in his best seller, The Post-American World, raises the same question. We have shifted, he says, "from a country which welcomed the world with open armsto a defensive crouch." His thesis is that not only did immigration build us as country, but also will keep us ahead of other world powers in the years to come. He concludes:

“Immigration also gives America a quality rare for a rich country, hunger and energy. As countries become wealthy, the drive to move up and succeed weakens. But America has found a way to keep itself constantly revitalized by streams of people who are looking to make a new life in a new world. These are the people who work long hours picking fruit in searing heat, washing dishes, building houses, working night shifts, and cleaning waste dumps. They come to the United States under terrible conditions, leave family and friends and community only because they want to work and get ahead in life. Americans have almost always worried about such immigrants—whether from Ireland or Italy, China or Mexico. But these immigrants have gone on to become the backbone of the American working class, and their children or grandchildren have entered the American mainstream. America has been able to tap this energy, manage diversity, assimilate newcomers and move ahead economically. Ultimately, this is what set this country apart from the experience of Britain and all other historical examples of great economic powers that grow fat and lazy and slip behind as they face the rise of leaner, hungrier nations.” (pp. 198-199)

We ignore these economic realities to our peril, but I have come to believe that the immigration crisis is at its root a spiritual crisis and that it must have a spiritual solution.

Although today is St Matthew’s day, I hope that the evangelist will forgive my departing from the lectionary and instead sharing with you two scriptural passages that have to do with the Biblical idea of the *scapegoat*. In Leviticus, chapter 16, we read of Israel’s annual selection of a goat to bear the collective sin of the nation as it was sent out into the desert to die. In our Gospel, John applies the notion of the scapegoat to Jesus himself.

French religious philosopher Rene Girard in his book aptly entitled *The Scapegoat* suggests that when societies or institutions are under great stress they have to find a way of releasing that anxiety. They do so by choosing an innocent victim or victims on which to project their collective fear. History is full of examples: Jews, Native Americans, African Americans, women, gay and lesbian people—all have suffered as innocent victims who have borne the sins of countries which were in deep crisis and needed someone to blame. And lest we get too smug, we might also add that this scapegoating mechanism is part of church life as well. There is no question that we in the Episcopal church are struggling for our very survival, and I don’t think it is going too far to suggest that Bob Duncan or Gene Robinson have served for some in our church as scapegoats, with each side claiming that “if only we could send them out into the desert, then everything would be OK again”.

For Christians, Jesus himself was the ultimate scapegoat, bearing the sins of all, or as Caiaphas reminded the Sanhedrin, “It is better that one man should die, than the whole nation suffer.” The implication is that we who follow Jesus must be ready to bear the

collective anxiety of society ourselves; that we too must be prepared to suffer and die. If Rene Girard is correct, then undocumented immigrants are only the latest in a long list of historical victims who have been singled out for attack even though they have done nothing wrong except to work hard, raise families, and pay taxes without the benefit of a passport. For this they have been literally sent off into the Arizona desert to die—over four thousand such deaths in the desert over the past decade, 10 times more men, women, and children than perished trying to escape over the Berlin wall. Scapegoating immigrants is something I see everyday in Arizona. The Dean of our cathedral, for example, received a call from a parishioner last week who was upset with his hosting a pro-immigration rally. “We have to do something about these illegals,” she insisted. “This terrible recession has wiped out my savings—and *it is all their fault.*” She is not alone, as more Americans lose their jobs and their savings, as our social and educational institutions unravel, and as our politicians fail to govern, the pressure to blame will become stronger, the need to find scapegoats will be even more intense, and bills like Arizona SB1070 will look tame in comparison with the social genocide down the pike. There is already proposed legislation in Arizona that would deprive children who were born in this country of undocumented parents of their citizenship, subjecting them to deportation. In addition, a well-known Phoenix DJ broadcast recently that there was nothing about illegal immigration that a few high powered rifles on this side of the border couldn’t solve.

This kind of irrational and daemonic hatred will not be stopped by well-meaning position papers (even from this House). This crisis will not be solved by more petitions, letters to our congressional representatives or pastoral letters. It will not evaporate in the face of rallies, political action groups, and court hearings. It will only respond to what we as Christians have learned from Jesus Christ—and which we have practiced at the best moments of our history—the path of non-violence and the way of the Cross.

It is time for us to reclaim that heritage.

Terrance Rynne in his new book on non-violence asks rhetorically: "It is a mystery to me that more Christians have not embraced the non-violent Jesus. It is a mystery to me that the Christian churches, are not, at this point in history, clearly proclaiming, with a strong and united voice, the way of nonviolent discipleship. Given the clear witness of Gandhi and the astonishing achievements of organized nonviolent action in the sixty years since his death, the liberation of country after country, from Poland, East Germany, and the Ukraine to South Africa, the Philippines, and Czechoslovakia, and given the powerful witness of Gandhian adherents such as Martin Luther King, Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel, and Nelson Mandela (and we might add Jonathan Merrick Daniels and Desmond Tutu) — why is it not more obvious to Christians that the Sermon on the Mount is the way forward? Given the united testimony of contemporary scripture scholarship, why do we still hang back from following the way of the nonviolent Jesus?" And he then answers: "The myth of redemptive violence in which our culture is

enmeshed is the belief that, when one is really up against it, only might can bring deliverance. When push comes to shove, most people believe, the only logical thing is to push back. One has every right to defend one's self, one's property, one's family, one's nation. End of story. The way to maintain power is to carry a big stick and not be afraid to use it when you have to. Otherwise you just invite attack. This is undoubtedly the conventional wisdom and the way of the world. The only problem is — it is not the gospel.” There are two defenses the Bible gives us against the dark art of scapegoating. The first is to name it for what is. A friend of mine found herself at a gathering of old college friends listening to a tirade against undocumented people, how they were the cause of all our nation’s problems. After an hour or so of this vindictive, she had had enough—“So, what do you think we ought to do, round up 12 million men, women, and children, put them in boxcars and dump them in desert?” The room grew suddenly silent and stayed that way. She had named the demon, and her friends could not respond to her exorcism; there was no answer. It is far more difficult to answer Caiphais’ question scapegoating question, “Is it not better that one man should die than the whole nation should suffer?” The answer is one that only Christians can provide. It means, like Jesus, we must be willing to become a scapegoat ourselves. Mahatma Gandhi, in a remarkably orthodox statement, describes Jesus’ action this way: “A man who was completely innocent, offered himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies, and became the ransom of the world. It was a perfect act.” Gandhi was describing the Way of the Cross. It was the basis for his principle of non-violence. His disciple, Martin Luther King Jr, saw it as the *only* way to defeat the power of evil—by submitting to it: In his words, “Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon which cuts without wounding and ennobles the man who wields it. It is a sword that heals.”

You may remember the movie from about 20 years ago about Gandhi. There is a famous scene which has haunted me ever since I saw it. It portrayed the march of thousands of Gandhi's disciples on the British stronghold of Dharasana in 1930s as part of their struggle for independence. Instead of attacking the fort, the Indian peasants approached the British guards unarmed, only to be clubbed one by one to the ground. The moment one peasant fell, another would step up to take his place. Hour after hour this continued until finally the British defenders could stand it no longer. They could not fight against those who would not fight back. They threw their clubs on the ground and walked away. The battle had been won without a shot being fired. Such was the power of nonviolent resistance.

It is also the power of the cross. It is a power that we must reclaim as a church as we struggle against the kind of human injustice we see happening in our country today. Our forebears fought the battle against discrimination in this country in the 1960s. They faced the fire-hoses in Birmingham, they walked the bridge at Selma. They held

their heads high in Little Rock. Now it is our turn. *For immigration is the human rights struggle of our time.* Our parents might have faced Sheriff Bull Conner, we now face Sheriff Joe Arpaio. They suffered the insults of Gov George Wallace, we listen to hate rhetoric of Gov Jan Brewer, just as Jesus dealt with Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate. And just as Jesus waded the *via dolorosa*, we must walk the wall in places like Agua Prieta, Tijuana, and Juarez. The principalities and powers are the same—only the names have been changed to protect the not-so-innocent.

We as the church cannot solve the immigration crisis. We cannot convince the majority of our nation that scapegoating is not the answer. We cannot force economic and political solutions. But we can do one thing, we can preach Jesus—and him crucified.

Another movie image comes to mind, this one from the 1986 film The Mission, which was about the eighteenth century Jesuit mission to the indigenous people of South America. Angered by the success of the mission, the Portuguese authorities attempt to shut it down by massacring all the villagers. As the soldiers close in on the village church, killing women and children on every side, the priest can do only one thing. Turning from the altar, he takes the host in his hands, raises it reverently, and walks straight into the sunlight and into the murderous musket fire.

The powers of darkness which contend against us are strong, but so is our faith. We face violence and oppression, not with worldly power but by preaching the Word of God and carrying the body of Christ, knowing that yes, we may go to jail, yes we may be physically attacked, yes we may even die.

Such has always been the way of our faith—As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then they kill you, then you win.”

My brothers and sisters, you may just want to write your lawyer’s phone number on your arm.

--The Rt. Rev. Kirk Stevan Smith
Bishop of Arizona