

A Lamb not a Scapegoat
Sunday, May 5, 2019
Rev. Dr. Anne Miner-Pearson

All through Holy Week and into the season of Easter, our readings tell of Jesus' focus on the inner circle of disciples. Whether during a meal, at the base of his cross, or encounters at the tomb or on a seashore, Jesus is guiding those initial followers whose names we have come to know: Peter, Andrew, Thomas, and a list of Marys - most notably Mary of Magdala . So it is rather curious to find Saul of Tarsus in our readings this morning. His connection to Jesus comes much later in time and his story is atypical of the familiar resurrection scenes.

But then, Saul is not like the other early followers - right from the get-go. Jesus' invitation to Saul lacks the same tone as the gospel accounts. No open and enticing "Come and see". No pausing on the shore to suggest that fishermen change from working in the depths of water to caring about depths of souls. No, Saul gets knocked to the ground and blinded by a flash of light. But then Saul isn't your run-of-the-mill Galilean doing business. It may be wise and necessary for the risen Lord to take stronger measures to get the attention of someone who's hellbent on marching followers from Damascus to Jerusalem.

Maybe sometimes offering new life takes more than parables and healings. Sometimes a dramatic move is the only way to jar someone into living from the place of love and not revenge. Because revenge and retaliation are certainly Saul's motivation. With those letters tucked in his robe, Saul means to harm and blame others for wrongdoings, mistakes, or faults he has decided belong to them. Saul is out to get those followers of the Way as early Christians are called. Saul is laying the blame for all that goes wrong on "others", regardless of their contribution to the situation.

There is a word we use for this particular kind of action and reaction: scapegoating. Now neither Saul - nor Jesus - knew that word, but they lived in a time when Saul's goal for the trip to Damascus would have been clearly and immediately understood. It was a time when "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" was an expected and acceptable way of doing life. There was no need to hide it. No reason to speak of it as "the shadow side". Those shadows danced openly in the marketplace. They played the tune of the tribe. Revenge and retaliation were the ways life went.

In fact, an ancient Hebrew ritual is the root for the word scapegoat. Once a year, a goat was designated to symbolically carry the people's sins on it. Whipped with sticks and reeds, the "escaping" goat was sent into the wilderness. The message: the community no longer bore their sins. Now they belonged to someone, something else. How neat and tidy. And the Hebrew people didn't have a corner on that dark place in the human ego. That behavior is part of the description of what is "tribal" and it's alive and well in our day. With or without ritual, examples fill our daily news, often couched in religious and political language.

Thus sin is somewhere among us and a scapegoat has to be found. That powerful image portrays a deep universal human tendency to place our negative thoughts, feelings and

actions on others. As a wise mentor showed me years ago: when you point a finger at someone else, watch where your other three fingers are pointing. What we can not accept in ourselves, we find in and assign to others.

But Jesus refuses to accept that ritual. Throughout his life, none of Jesus' actions and words point or hint at a whiff of revenge or retaliation. Not during his arrest, trial and crucifixion. Not in the Garden of Gethesame when swords are waving in the air and slicing off an ear. Not in front of Pilate. Not even on the cross as life painfully ebbs from his body. "Forgive them, Father. They do not know what they are doing." There is the subtle message of Jesus on the cross: "They do not know what they are doing."

There is no scapegoat on the cross. There is a lamb - the lamb of God. Jesus always points to the resurrection life which is lived from a deep, abiding place of love. Think about every resurrection story and how Jesus greets and interacts with the disciples. Those disciples who denied, doubted and deserted, setting up blaming, guilt and judging. Yet, the risen Lord invites his followers into a new way of living. He offers them the power of forgiveness. He gives them a peace that passes understanding. Three times Jesus underlines their ministry - feed my flock, feed my sheep, feed my lambs.

And when it comes to Saul, Jesus asks "Why?" Jesus confronts Saul's inability to see the oneness beneath and beyond the differences. In persecuting others, Saul is denying his own spiritual connection with God. Saul is denying his own spiritual connection with others. Saul sets out on a path of "breathing threats and murder". And, amazingly, those kinds of actions have a way of pulling others onto the same path. Remember Ananias? Jesus tells him in a vision to seek out Saul. Then, Ananias mirrors Saul and, like Saul, can't see the connection he has with Saul.

Throughout Jesus' life and death, he is pointing to the resurrected life. There is no scapegoat of blaming and shaming. There is a Lamb of compassion and love. With the Lamb, there is the freedom from the oppression of hatred and fear. There is the freedom that comes with forgiveness. There is the gift of peace. There is the gift of "myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." And all the creatures said, "Amen."