

Genesis 3:8-15; Psalm 130; 2Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

The parable of Satan casting out Satan is by no means the most famous of the parables of Jesus. If I was to mention the Prodigal Son, or the Feeding of the Five Thousand, or the Parable of the Mustard Seed, most of us would instantly recognize what I was talking about. But the parable of Satan casting out Satan? Not so much.

In fact many of us here may never have heard of it at all. That's not all that surprising. It appears only once every three years in our cycle of Sunday readings. Given the complexity of that lectionary cycle with moveable feasts and what have you, it's possible that we have heard it even less often than that - every sixth or ninth year perhaps. Today we read it from Mark, but Matthew's and Luke's version are never read in church. So it's no wonder that it doesn't seem familiar. In a way, it has simply slipped 'under the radar' so to speak.

But there is a growing body of scholarship to suggest that this brief and somewhat perplexing speech provides a pivotal statement by Jesus of the purpose of His gospel ministry. The French anthropologist Rene Girard wrote a book called "The Scapegoat" which has started a whole new wave of thinking about this. His work

provides a starting point for us in understanding the significance of this parable for the whole of the gospel.

Jesus makes this little speech, the parable of Satan casting out Satan, in response to an accusation. That much is key. The scribes from Jerusalem are alarmed by the size of the crowds that have begun to follow Jesus everywhere. They would prefer to see those big crowds following *them* after all, but they don't know how to do the healings that Jesus does, the ones that have drawn the crowds in the first place. One supposes that they may feel a bit threatened, or that they genuinely feel concerned that something harmful is taking place, or that they simply have never seen anything like this follower frenzy before and they feel alarmed. After all even the family of Jesus is saying that he has gone out of his mind. So the scribes make their accusation: that the healing power of Jesus is evil, that he is only able to cast out demons because He is possessed by the demon of the devil himself.

Now, I know that we seldom talk about the devil in 'mainline' churches like this one. An old saying, "Speak of the devil and he doth appear" captures our reticence inadvertently to summon evil merely by mentioning. But it is characteristic of the healings of Jesus that the 'demon' must be named if it is to be healed. Simply

pretending it isn't there, though it is a time honoured practice among Anglicans and others, won't make the trouble go away. Nor will our longstanding cultural commitment to such truisms as "The less said, the better" and the like. We need to 'walk the talk,' really doing what Jesus does, really *being* His followers. In the sense that we need to follow His practice of naming the trouble, speaking it out loud, in order to be healed of it, we also need to 'talk the walk.' So, since Jesus mentions him in the parable, I venture to do the same.

The challenge though, for all human communities, is how to do this without making things worse. There's the rub. After all, that's what the scribes of Jerusalem are seeking to do. This whole crowd business and the inexplicable healings of Jesus are obviously a problem and they want to put it to rest. Seeking to 'name the demon' they make their accusation: that, since the healing of Jesus are inexplicable to them, they must be evil. He must have used the evil power of a demon, 'Beelzebul,' to heal people by driving out demons. Therefore Jesus Himself must be driven out.

This is where our human brains go south a little bit. This 'driving out dynamic' is in a sense 'hard wired' into us. It triggers the 'fight of flight' part of us, our amygdala or animal brain or whatever it's called. Even to speak about 'demons' or 'driving someone out'

makes it difficult for us humans to speak clearly, to hear clearly, and perhaps even to think clearly, so please bear with me as I attempt to follow Jesus through it.

I also want to acknowledge that although I have often spoken this way before, the way I am going to speak about the saving power of Jesus and His gospel will still sound new to some of us. We may not have heard it spoken of this way much before. I am doing this new way of speaking because I am seeing in the communities around me, that some of the familiar ways are no longer being heard. A number of us preachers are seeing that we need a fresh perspective, a new way of hearing the good news. So please bear with my humble attempts to freshen things up.

When we hear this idea that someone thought Jesus was evil and ought to be driven out, our first thought is, “Wow. That’s ridiculous. Good thing that didn’t happen.” But it did. He *was* driven out. With great public finality, driven out of this world. Crucified for all to see. The reason was clear. He was named as the demon. Everyone - *and I do mean everyone, since at the moment of His crucifixion Jesus was literally nobody, a non-person* - everyone came to agree that He was an evil blasphemer and HAD to be eliminated, for the good of the community. In the words of Caiaphas the high priest, it

was better that “one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.”

This is the classic ‘scapegoat’ scenario. The troubles of the community are heaped on the head of one person who is then either killed or driven out. Hey presto. The troubles are over. Peace is restored and since ‘everyone’ has been involved in this all against one violence, everyone is now friends again.

It seems important to remember that the term ‘scapegoat’ is deeply biblical, described in detail in the Torah itself, the Book of Leviticus chapter 16. The scapegoat dynamic is the Bible’s ancient wisdom about how human communities are formed. It *does* seem a bit dark to speak about our communities that way, but the purpose of doing so is the hope of creating a different kind of community in our churches, and to follow the lead of Jesus in doing so.

Jesus understands this scapegoat dynamic utterly. He understands completely that unless His gospel is received, this scapegoating *mechanism* will continue to be the *only* way for human beings to form communities. Evidence of that is everywhere in everyone’s history. We want our communities to be pure and good, so we drive out of them everything and everyone that endangers that purity. The

presenting case before the nation of Canada at the moment is that a while ago we tried to purify and bring peace, order, and good government to the country by eliminating every last Indian. We passed a piece of legislation called The Indian Act which explicitly named this scapegoating effort. But, thanks be to God, the Truth and Reconciliation process we are witnessing at the moment shows clearly that since the gospel of Jesus arrived, scapegoating has been gradually losing its effectiveness. In the presence of the crucified Christ it is impossible NOT to see that scapegoating works fine, until the next time something goes wrong. Then another scapegoat is needed. The work of Jesus is to show us that a different way is needed and that different way is the gospel. Truth and reconciliation are founded on it (Desmon Tutu) and are a sign of its growing presence.

When I say that the gospel is the only saving alternative to scapegoating I mean two things. The first is that if we *don't* do the gospel we will by definition be doing scapegoating. The second is that in using the word 'gospel,' I *don't* mean that Jesus will magically do this saving for us. I do mean that the gospel will be saving for us if we actually receive it, make it our only guiding principle, and put it into action ourselves, in our own community.

The difference between scapegoating and the gospel is that the one is about driving out and the gospel is about bringing in. The old, scapegoating way is about accusing and blaming. The gospel is about welcoming and forgiving. In our Christian context, forgiveness means 'giving way' - allowing ourselves to be changed by the other in order to accommodate, welcome, offer hospitality to them. This is what the TRC is about. Grappling with our need as a nation to accommodate the people who were here first, to allow our culture to be changed by theirs in order to find reconciliation with them and a true peace.

This is the gospel, the new founding principle of our own community here, because we are Christians. 'Driving out' is no longer an option for us. We are to die on a cross, cut off our right hands, pluck the log from our own eye, do whatever it takes to welcome the other and to avoid driving them out. We are none of us perfect at this, but with God's help we are learning.

Although He was not able to avoid being driven out for His new ideas by means of crucifixion, Jesus was able to do two things:

- 1) He chose freely, deliberately, and consciously, in the hope of resurrection, to step into the role of the scapegoat, because He

knew it was the only way to deliver His gospel and transform humanity. In doing so He destroyed the cultural mechanism of scapegoating for good, leaving it to gradually collapse over succeeding centuries.

- 2) He left behind Him the parable of Satan casting out Satan. This provides us with an all important self understanding: that accusations and threats of expulsion bring a false peace. False because it needs more and more scapegoats over time. In that sense scapegoating really is based on Satan, whose name literally means “The Accuser,” casting himself out again and again. Clearly his house is divided and he cannot stand.

But the gospel, is good news, ‘new’ news of a forgiving welcome for all. All. All! In gospel communities, no one is driven out, or even left out. All are welcome and all are included. As Christians, we’re even willing to allow our selves and our communities to be changed in order to welcome people and *by welcoming* people. Now that is good news. [Out of it will come the peace of Christ, which is a peace the world cannot give, and it is eternal.]