

Acts 7:51-8:1a (JB Phillips)

"You obstinate people, heathen in your thinking, heathen in the way you are listening to me now! It is always the same - you never fail to resist the Holy Spirit! Just as your fathers did so are you doing now. Can you name a single prophet whom your fathers did not persecute? They killed the men who long ago foretold the coming of the just one, and now in our own day you have become betrayers and his murderers. You are the men who have received the Law of God miraculously, by the hand of angels, and you are the men who have disobeyed it!"

These words stung them to fury and they ground their teeth at him in rage. Stephen, filled through all his being with the Holy Spirit, looked steadily up into Heaven. He saw the glory of God, and Jesus himself standing at his right hand. "Look!" he exclaimed, "the heavens are opened and I can see the Son of Man standing at God's right hand!"

At this they put their fingers in their ears. Yelling with fury, as one man they made a rush at him and hustled him out of the city and stoned him. The witnesses of the execution flung their clothes at the feet of a young man by the name of Saul. So they stoned Stephen while he called upon God, and said, "Jesus, Lord, receive my spirit!" Then, on his knees, he cried in ringing tones, "Lord, forgive them for this sin." And with these words he fell into the sleep of death while Saul gave silent assent to his execution.

Blocked Ears, but Making Progress

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

Date: April 20, 2008

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Text: *Acts 7:51-8:1a*

James Carroll, the famed author of *Constantine's Sword*, wrote a column for the Boston Globe recently. In it he told this story from his childhood.

“AS A HIGH school freshman, attending a small private prep school,” he said, “I was one of a number of pranksters. We made the flag disappear from the flagpole. We put goofy hats on the bust of the school patron in the foyer. We organized silent boycotts of the greasy French fries in the lunch room. We dropped books on cue in Latin class.

“One day, we went too far with some act of mischief, and the headmaster went ballistic at morning assembly. A buzz of anxiety coursed through the school. I forget how, but the damning finger soon pointed to me, and I took the fall. I was summoned to the headmaster's office, where, wielding a stick with grave ceremony... , he inflicted multiple blows on my backside.”¹

Carroll recalls how humiliated he was by the event. The headmaster, the highest authority, had disciplined him in a way that was public and shaming, and, of course, a lot more common then than now. But the thing that caught Carroll by utter surprise were the two effects that his “strokes” as they were called, caused.

First, his classmates, rather than seeing him as shamed and humiliated, made him into a hero. They treated him with deference and public respect. His punishment at the hands of the headmaster clearly had led to his social promotion.

Second, the headmaster's rage was mollified in an instant. The anxiety and disquiet on campus that had accompanied the various pranks was resolved. The headmaster basked in his restored authority.

All in all the event led to considerable good feeling and gratitude at all levels of the school. Structure and order were reestablished. The students found the bond of affection among them strengthened. The administration was self-satisfied. All because one boy had been physically punished. One boy paid the price, and it bought a sense of well-being in the whole community, including for the boy himself. Powerful stuff.

Carroll goes on to tell us how he thinks this whole mechanism works.

He says, “Now I understand that violence can have this effect across a range of social situations. Indeed, hurt-induced mystical cohesion accounts in large part for why we humans are addicted to turning on each other with weapons. We find an infinite variety of victims, and their suffering serves a social purpose. African-American men subjected with wild disproportionality to the caged violence of prisons. Muslim "terrorists" in torture camps. Enslaved women. Death row. In case after case, threatened authority locates a victim on whom to unload.

¹Boston Globe, April 14, 2008

“Whether the designated object of punishment is guilty (Saddam Hussein, say) or innocent (the American soldiers whose faces we see on the news each night) does not matter.”

Carroll goes on to say, “This impulse to salve communal anxiety by inflicting hurt was the defining core of American public life after Sept. 11.”²

It seems so improbable, and yet perfectly obvious when you think about it. Threatened authority dearly loves the magic of violence. It takes on a religious fervor. Our president invoked a Crusade, you will remember, to punish those who had done America wrong. And when the hunt for Bin Laden was stumped, Iraq became a more visible substitute remedy. We would go in and inflict punishment on Saddam Hussein, the streets would fill with welcoming Iraqis, and America’s wound suddenly be healed.

Threatened authority loves the magic of violence. It wasn’t accidental that the charge against Jesus was, “Are you the king of the Jews?” Herod would have been threatened by that. And so would have Rome. Even the Jews who lived on a razor’s edge, subjects in their own city, would have been. Threatened authority loves the magic of violence, because it in fact works like magic.

It works like magic in the sense that the violence solves so much. In James Carroll’s school, there were many pranksters, but it took the punishment of only one to bring about calm. And if the truth were known, it probably wasn’t student pranks that had the community and the headmaster so anxious and upset in the first place. A few boys dropping Latin books and refusing to eat French fries just isn’t that upsetting. No doubt there were larger anxieties in the community. Maybe the faculty and the headmaster were at odds. Maybe the Trustees were concerned about the financial state of the school. Maybe the applicant pool was dwindling. Who knows what complicated streams and cross-currents were at work in causing the distress in the system. But what we do know is that one boy, a scapegoat, was all it took to quiet it all down. The pranks that the boys were playing probably had little to do with the disquiet, but violence against one of them, not even against all of them who were playing the pranks, was all it took to still the storm. Utter magic.

In the Gospel of John Caiaphas understands the mechanism. He rationalizes the crucifixion of Jesus saying, “It is better to have one person die for the people.” He understood that Jesus could be a good scapegoat. One small potato sacrificed to quell the communal uneasiness. And again, was Jesus the real threat in Jerusalem? Was a vagabond preacher likely to throw Herod or Pilate off their game? Was he even a real worry to the Jewish authorities? Probably not. A small potato to quell the fears of the city. We’ll never know all the reasons why they thought to pick Jesus to crucify. But the sign over his head, “Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews,” as ridiculous as it was, was enough to work the magic. Like a boy beaten with a rod for dropping a Latin book, he took the blame and wiped the slate clean.

The story of Jesus’ crucifixion has a central difference, though. There can be little doubt that he was meant to be the scapegoat. But the scapegoat has to be guilty, or at least the scapegoat has to seem guilty. James Carroll did pull pranks, even if they weren’t the main issue on campus. People did fly planes into the World Trade Center’s towers, and we were told the war was aimed at punishing the terrorists and assuring that they would never do such a thing

²Ibid

again. Jesus was accused of threatening the reigning authorities. But in his case, from the beginning, it was clear that he was innocent. About as close as he came to being a king was when he said that his kingdom wasn't of this world.

René Girard is right when he says that Jesus changes everything because in his crucifixion the scapegoating failed. There are two things that set apart Jesus' crucifixion and made the scapegoating a failure. For scapegoating to work, you at least have to believe that the victim is guilty. When the victim is perceived to be guilty, authority demonstrates its control. And even the victim's allies win, for they gain a hero. James Carroll became a hero among the students as a guilty party who took his strokes. But Jesus is the quintessential innocent victim. For those who have eyes to see, he unmasks the scapegoating magic for what it is, a sleight-of-hand, a trick. The story tells us from the beginning that Jesus is innocent. In Jesus, those who look must see that an innocent victim was crucified. And when they see that, the sorcery falls apart.

The second difference adds weight to the first. Jesus outmaneuvered the authorities. He took their authority from them. In the face of innocence he forgave his perpetrators. At the moment their magic should have worked he snatched it from them: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Imagine if James Carroll had turned to the headmaster and said, "I forgive you, for you know not what you do." He would have meant that the punishment was greater than the crime. The headmaster wouldn't have felt quite so good about the beating. The community's anxieties wouldn't have gone away so easily. And Carroll wouldn't have been such a hero among his peers, either. He would have deflated the scapegoat mechanism.

One very good way to understand the power of the crucifixion of Jesus is to understand that it revealed the power of sacred violence for what it is, a sham. It exposed the fact that the sacrifice of innocent victims to restore or maintain order is based in falsehood. When Jesus gave us the story of an innocent victim who forgave his persecutors, he gave us counter-story to the one with which humankind has fooled itself since Cain slew Abel.

It's fair to say that now, 2000 years after the lesson of the cross, we're still missing the point. In identifying "African-American men subjected with wild disproportionality to the caged violence of prisons. Muslim "terrorists" in torture camps. Enslaved women. Death row," Carroll identifies but a few of the victims that societies continue to locate, victims who are declared guilty for the sake of restoring and keeping the peace. If Jesus changed things, they haven't changed entirely, or maybe even very much. Why have things remained so much the same.

The story of the stoning of Stephen gives us some clues. Stephen tells the crowd that they are listening to him the way they have always listened. That is, they aren't listening at all. Stephen has tried to expose their complicity in the death of Jesus. He has tried to expose their execution of the innocent victim. He's not doing it to blame them so he can punish them. Rather Stephen wants them to see that all of them, all of us, have this natural predilection to scapegoat people, usually powerless people, essentially in order to make ourselves feel better.

Stephen tried to tell the crowd of persecutors about what they had done and what they were doing, but they would not listen. Indeed, they stuck their fingers in their ears like children on the playground, and went, "Na, Na, Na, Na. I can't hear you!" In the end, when that didn't work, they stoned him to death. They meant to make him a scapegoat. The problem was they ended up with another innocent victim who didn't fight back and who uttered forgiveness with

his dying breath.

Stephen continues the work of Jesus to expose this destructive mechanism of scapegoating, which not only victimizes the innocent, but also prevents us from actually dealing with the real problems we have.

James Carroll took the strokes at his school and an era of good feeling set in. For a time. But for how long? Probably not very long. For the disagreements in the administration, or the finances, or the admissions problems were left unaddressed. Rather than solving anything, the era of good feeling that came from the scapegoating meant that nobody was addressing the problems that actually were in the community.

The baseball team can fire the manager. Maybe for awhile things will go better. But unless the underlying problems in the team are dealt with, changing managers will be just a distraction. America may have felt better for awhile after the president went on his crusade, but in the end, when the truth becomes known, not only have there been many, many innocent victims, but we also are the worse for the distraction it has all been from the real problems we face: energy, the environment, poverty, the economy, and the response to natural disasters like Katrina to name just five obvious ones.

Like the crowd that stoned Stephen, we too often stick our fingers in our ears, pretend not to hear, and continue doing what so plainly doesn't work, and what so plainly causes harm.

I titled this sermon "Blocked Ears, but Making Progress." So far, I have said little about progress. So far I have said that we haven't come very far. And that is, unfortunately, true enough.

But things have changed. At least some of the stories we tell ourselves now have different heroes. Sure, there are still stick-wielding authorities and martyr-victims, one to console and incite the oppressor and the other the oppressed. But in the midst of this clamorous call to arms there stands the story of Jesus and of Stephen. Of Martin Luther King and of Mahatma Gandhi. It is an uphill climb. The human preference for violence and scapegoating runs deep. But less and less does it ring true. The old ways fight hard to survive. The progress is in fits and starts. But ultimately we will see clearly that love and forgiveness offer us real peace rather than the appearance of peace, true peace rather than an unending cycle of violence and destruction. Amen.