

“Fear Not: Selling and Buying Fear”

John 2:13-16

I recently saw a social media post by one of my friends that spoke truth to me. It said, “If you are my friend and you support Trump, you are my friend. If you are my friend and you support Biden, you are my friend. If you feel the need to degrade those who feel differently than you...Maybe we are not friends.” In a climate of division and deep political fear, this kind of sentiment is so rare. Many of us are caught up in the fear frenzy over this election. What would happen if there is not a peaceful transition of power? What would happen if the mail is tampered with? What would happen if the election is too close? The world is going to come to an end if the party you support does not win. Trying to get votes has become synonymous with scaring voters and selling them fear. One of the most common strategies for selling fear is to have a common enemy, a scapegoat that we can blame for our problems. The term "scapegoat" comes from an ancient Jewish ritual, which, according to French philosopher and writer René Girard, "consisted of driving into the wilderness a goat on which all the sins of Israel had been laid. The high priest placed his hands on the head of the goat, and this act was supposed to transfer onto the animal everything likely to poison relations between members of the community. The effectiveness of the ritual was the idea that the sins were expelled with the goat and then the community was rid of them." Somehow as human beings we have believed in violence as a way out of our fear. We have believed that if we projected our fears on an animal, a person, or a group of people, we then don't have to deal with them ourselves. With the projection of fear, we could violate others for the sake of finding our peace and security.

In the times of great fear, this kind of scapegoating pattern becomes even stronger. Think of all the conspiracy theories that are out there right now about the coronavirus and on how to deal with it? Such reactions are not new! Shamefully, many 14th century Christians blamed the Black Plague on Jews, spreading conspiracy theories that they had poisoned wells. It is also interesting to look back in history at what was known in 1918 as the “Spanish” Flu and how people struggled to get a grip on it. Even the name “Spanish Flu” was a misnomer. According to scientific evidence, that flu did not originate in Spain. Another interesting tidbit of wisdom from that flu is that resistance to wearing masks was also part of that experience. People were fined and put in jail for not wearing a mask.

Some of the same patterns are repeating themselves today because they are based in our fears and the people who are using these fears to get us to their side. A lot of the violence we are experiencing today is based on our fears of the “other;” those who are defined as the enemy or as a threat and who become our scapegoats.

It is interesting that at the heart of the Christian story is Jesus' effort to transform these human patterns of projection which lead to violence. Our Bible story for this week gives

us an overview of Jesus' work of transformation. In John 2 we hear about Jesus visiting the temple in Jerusalem where he confronted the money changers. The temple was an essential part of the Jewish identity at that time. All the Jews in Diaspora tried to go to Jerusalem for the high holy days. Yet, the temple priests evoked resentment because of their connection to the Roman Empire which was occupying the land. The chief priests in the temple were appointed by the Roman officials and served their interests. The temple was the place for collecting taxes for the temple and for the Roman Empire. The disruption of the commercial activities in the temple during a high holy festival meant a major loss of revenue for the Roman government. It would be like shutting down all major stores on Black Friday!!!

The prophetic act of Jesus of the cleansing of the temple was a bold plan for communicating a strong message of hope and transformation for the people of Israel. It was a nonviolent act of resistance to the powers of the day and to the blindness of the people to a way out of the social injustices of their country. Jesus himself became the ultimate scapegoat while trying to help people see the futility of scapegoating.

Often times, we find ourselves caught up in the polarities of dualistic world thinking. We get trapped having to be on one side or the other: Good or evil, rich or poor, life or death, and so on. We have to be the good guys who get rid of the bad guys, even if we have to use violence. But Jesus offered people a third way; a way that dealt with the transformation of our fears. When it came to social change and transformation, Jesus presented a new way to deal with the issues of resistance to those who oppress others. People often think that there are only two ways to respond to an offensive or an injustice behavior from others: Fight or flight. You either run away from the problem or you fight the opposing side. Jesus offers us a third way. Jesus does not call for a submit-or-subdue kind of response. He invites us to a new and creative third way. This third way is about breaking the cycle of the conflict or injustice and exposing and disarming its violence. Jesus showed in the cleansing of the temple that there is always the option of resisting evil without becoming evil ourselves. Jesus was disarming the money/trade activities of the temple to disrupt the system of Roman oppression and of scapegoating. There is also in this way of thinking the possibility of the redemption and transformation of the opponent. No one has to lose because we are all in need of redemption. The opponent can find the courage to change his/her behavior. Jesus' third way allows room for all to be transformed.

Eric Law writes, "In the world we live in today, we are not taught to work through our fear of God, fear of others, and fear of nature, a process that leads us to offer ourselves to ministries. Instead, marketers, politicians, and the media are projecting fears while offering us symbolic substitutes for the struggles that are needed to work through our real fears. We are offered sheep, cattle, and doves that we did not raise for the purpose thank-offerings to God. Since these easy substitutes do not really address the fears at hand, we end up fearing even more the next time this fear is evoked. More substitutes are offered for us to buy to alleviate our fears again. We become addicted to the substitutes. And, in time, we are willing to pay more for them –not just our money or our

votes, but our freedom, our sense of personhood, our care for our community, our love for God.”

The path of scapegoating is so easy to follow because we have known this path for thousands of years. As President Dwight D. Eisenhower put it when he said, “The search for a scapegoat is the easiest of all hunting expeditions.” The path of Jesus is about learning to face our fears without projecting them onto others. Here is the biggest surprise of this path. Jesus does this through helping us to experience love. Jesus knew that the only way we can find the courage to face our deep emotional fears is when we experience the depth of how much we are loved. To know that each of us, just as we are, warts and all, are so loved by God is the real key to our ability to stop projecting our fears onto others. That is why Jesus invites us to a feast of love. When we come to the table, we are invited to come as we are and to allow others to come as they are. That is the beauty and mystery of this feast. Everyone is invited and welcomed to the table! Worthiness has nothing to do with it!

So how does this translate into our daily life? I believe that the human patterns of scapegoating and violence can only be transformed when we choose to immerse ourselves in love and kindness instead of scapegoating and violence. When we refuse to participate in hating or vilifying the enemy, the other side, or anyone defined as the other, we allow room for God to work in and through us to heal the world. The next time, you find yourself fearing or hating the other, imagine them sitting at the table of Christ. This is not to say that we don't disagree with others or challenge the wrongs that are committed. It is about something deeper. It is about never forgetting the image of God in them.

I invite you to the table of Christ today with these wise words from Thomas Merton, "So instead of loving what you think is peace, love other [people] and love God above all. And instead of hating the people you think are warmongers, hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed - but hate these things in yourself, not in another." Amen.