

Proper 18
Matthew 18:15-20

Salvific Violence Vs. Cruciform Salvation: a Girardian reading of Mathew 16-18
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If you want to see wailing and gnashing of teeth, all you have to do is go to a playground and wait ten minutes. On my walk the other day, I watched three little boys, about 6 years old, playing with a ball. One of the boys decided he wanted the ball and yanked it from the other boy. The third boy who didn't want the ball at first suddenly decided the ball was all he wanted in the world. Thus ensued a dramatic display of pushing and yelling and crying. We adults might shake our heads at those boys, but we practice similar behavior. But, it's not the ball anymore. Now, we covet that Tesla, that house, that brand name purse, that trip to Bora Bora; or, if it's not "materialistic", we might covet that person's power, charisma, talent, or standing in the community. Our shape of the brawl would be judgmentalism, snide remarks, painting the other person in the worst possible light (and the self in the most righteous light).

According to the anthropologist, Rene Girard, this behavior I just described is called "Mimetic Rivalry". Humans, according to Girard, copy each other. But, we copy each other intensely, above all other primates. He calls us "hypermimetic." He posits that we don't desire something till we see someone else have it; then we *really* want it. We see the other as our rival for the thing we now desire. When we don't have it, we become jealous and would resort to violence in action or in words to attain what we do not have. So, when two or three are together, there is mimetic rivalry. And that is why Jesus says, "I gotta be there to keep you all from killing each other."

The scripture verse, "Where two or three are gathered, there I will be in the midst of them," tends to be interpreted in such a way as to give us warm "Emmanuel"

fuzzies. But, the context is not coffee with friends or a prayer meeting. The context is conflict. In fact, this is court language, following the Jewish law that there be a witness to record what has been decided. Jesus is the witness to our decisions about our conflict. But, Jesus being our savior, is also Emmanuel, God with us: he comes to die on the cross as the sacrificial victim, to disclose our violence due to this rivalry, and be raised to lead us away from the inevitability of our violence.

Inevitable violence. There's nothing more disheartening to me than this. I confess that I stewed in a pool of depression this week when I watched the violent footage of what's happened in Kenosha, Wisconsin. This violence is not a unique experience in our time. It has become inevitable because we believe violence is salvific.

Jesus talked about inevitable violence. In Chapter 17 of Matthew, which the lectionary skips, Jesus said that the "scandal must come." He uses the Greek word *skandelon* and it is also translated as "offense", "causes of sin", "fall away", but most often "stumbling block". It is basically the word "scandal." He said, "The scandal must come, but woe to one by whom scandal comes." In Chapter 17, Jesus reserves his most serious warning to those who scandalize the "little ones". This means children, but it also means the most vulnerable, the most victimized. He is quite severe, saying that anyone who causes the little ones to stumble or sin, should tie a millstone around their neck and throw themselves into the sea. He also says, "If your hand scandalizes you, cut it off; if your eye scandalizes you, pull it out" (Matt. 18:8-9). Causing someone to stumble, as we heard in Chapter 16, is to be in league with Satan. "Get you behind me, Satan, for you are a stumbling block/scandal to me."

Last Sunday, in Chapter 16 of Matthew, Jesus told his disciples about his inevitable violent death. He says that he *must* be crucified. Must. The cross is not optional when contesting the powers of oppression. This is because the oppressive powers will see Jesus' Kingdom as rivalry and will use violence to stop it. The cross is a must because the scandal is inevitable--somebody will get killed

when mimetic rivalry rises to a terrible pitch; there will be a targeted sacrificial victim. They will point to the victim and say, “See, look, they are the source of the problem. Why were they protesting and causing discord? Or, why was he carrying a gun, if he didn’t want trouble?” The community can look to these victims as the source of the problem rather than at itself. The unfortunate thing is that it will happen again. But, Jesus himself has chosen to be the sacrificial victim and because he is innocent, we have no one to look to but ourselves for the source of violence. This honest look, though, is not for the faint of heart. Even with the promise of forgiveness, some refuse the honest gaze. In today’s passage, we hear that not everyone is willing to do so. But for those who do, reconciliation is possible.

It is in this reality and hope that Jesus exhorts his disciples to address scandal in the community and work toward forgiveness in today’s reading in Chapter 18. The aim is to “regain the brother or sister”. The aim is reconciliation.

Too often, though, we rush this reconciliation process. In today’s scripture, we see there is a process and it could actually be a long one of truth-telling and repentance. That is the process by which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa operates, as it seeks healing and unity post-apartheid. As the name implies, reconciliation cannot happen without truth-telling. The commission understood that genuine healing meant listening to the stories of victims and an honest and bold look at the history of racism, before being able to offer a cure. Too often, we want to skip the suffering of the cross and get right to Easter. But Easter has no meaning without the cross. It is merely plastic grass and rabbits.

If we are to break the cycle of violence that Kenosha and other tragic events represent, we will need to spend lots of time listening to the historic pain of victims. It is not an accident that this scene in today’s gospel reading comes after the parable of the lost sheep. Why does Jesus leave the 99 and go after the one lost? Because that one has something to teach the 99 about what being lost is like. The community needs to hear the nature of the scandal that caused the one

to fall away. If they are to be one flock, they must make room this “little one” to have its voice and its truth. This is what real reconciliation and peace looks like.

The good news of Jesus Christ is that we do not have to be enslaved to the cycles of violence and separation. Real healing and reconciliation can happen if we take time for truth-telling and deep listening to the “little ones” and reorganize our relationships by looking to Jesus, rather than to the old rivalries. If we follow him by way of the cross, then we follow him into resurrection life. Then violence is not inevitable. Then we can be one, as Christ is one.