

Proper 17C: Hebrews 13.1-8,15-16

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I felt like I should return to Calvary with t-shirts—printed according to Calvary brand standards of course, Robyn—I thought I should bring you all shirts that said “My rector took a sabbatical and all I got were a few stupid sermon illustrations.” That may well prove to be the case. But I’m going to begin this morning not with a travelogue, but with one of Aesop’s fables. It goes like this.

Once upon a time the North Wind and the Sun had an argument about who was the strongest. They decided to settle the matter with a contest. The first one to get a traveler to remove their cloak would be declared the winner. Soon enough, a woman came walking down the path. So the North Wind, as Aesop put it, “blew with all his might and main a blast, cold and fierce as a Thracian storm.” The traveler’s cloak whipped and flapped, but the harder and colder the North Wind blew, she clutched the coat to herself only more tightly.

Then the Sun broke out, and his gentle beams dispersed the cold. The traveler felt the welcome warmth, and as the Sun shone brighter and brighter, she sat down beside the road, unbuttoned her cloak and set it aside. Not by force or fury, but of her own accord. And so the Sun was declared the most powerful force in the daytime sky.

That story was nearly 600 years old when Jesus was born, and my newsfeed suggests we still haven’t learned its lesson. We still seem to think the application of a little more violent force is what’s needed to set the world aright, don’t we? Whether it’s verbal force or physical force, the winds just keep blowing harder and colder, from north and south, left and right. And then, when people pull their cloaks only more tightly to themselves for protection, we think, “Well, I guess our righteous winds are just going to have to blow even colder and even harder.”

Our reading from the letter to the Hebrews begins with a line that’s so Christian-y as to be skipped over. “Let mutual love continue,” we read. Let the warmth of the Sun, not the force of the cold North Wind, we might say, be the energy by which this community lives.

Hebrews, as the clever ones among you may have guessed, was written to a community of Jewish followers of Jesus. After the instruction, “Let mutual love continue,” we find a list of some of the basic values of the ancient Hebrews. The first is, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” If that sounds familiar, it’s because you can let your Bible fall open just about anywhere and read about the need to meet the stranger, the alien, the foreigner with hospitality and kindness. More than once in scripture,

someone offers a stranger hospitality, only to find they've just shared a meal with an angel.

The list continues. Living in mutual love also involves remembering those in prison and those who are being tortured. It also means honoring the promises of marriage, and keeping free of the love of money. Be content with what you have, we're told.

At first glance, it's a curious list, isn't it? It's followed with this: "...for [God] has said 'I will never leave you or forsake you,' so we can say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can anyone do to me?'" These are old promises that Jews held dear, from Deuteronomy and then Psalm 118.

Apparently mutual love is not the default glue that binds every society together. Actually neither mutuality nor love is a given. A community has to be intentional about the forces that define it. Don't let the binding force be fear, scripture says.

I had two wonderful companions on my sabbatical. We were fortunate that Ardelle's work could be arranged so that she could come along. The other was a 20th century French thinker named Rene Girard. Girard was a distant second to Ardelle, by the way. And I just took some of his writings. I actually don't think he'd be much fun to share an AirBNB with.

Anyway, by studying the literature and ancient myths of various cultures and religions, and by simply observing how people interact, Girard developed a theory about how human communities form. Here's an oversimplification.

If you set two toddlers down with a pile of toys, when one picks up a rag doll and begins to show interest, what happens? Well, the doll the first child now possesses often becomes the most interesting toy in the room to the other. The second child's desire didn't originate in him. He's copied it from the first child. And now the two are locked in a rivalry for something they both want. A rivalry that may soon produce much wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Girard said we don't outgrow these rivalries. They're everywhere, from our myths to the morning news. What is consumer demand but a grownup version of my wanting something because you do too? It's what makes the economy go round, isn't it? The trouble is that our rivalries can and do turn violent. In the Bible, the first murder took place between the sons of Adam and Eve. It's Cain's jealous murder of Abel that marks the beginning of human society. Notably, God does not punish Cain with death. God gives Cain a mark that will keep him from being killed for his crime as he wanders the earth.

When our rivalries and our societies grow violent, we don't know how to make the cycle stop. Because almost every act of violence is in response to violence, real or imagined. On and on the cycle goes, as we try to set things straight. We can't find a way off the awful treadmill until someone says, "You know... maybe all this trouble between you and me is that guy's fault!" And so we send the violence that's destroying

our community onto a scapegoat. This is not, please note, how God stopped the cycle after the death of Abel. But finally, our scapegoat provides a little relief from the violence. At least for us.

Girard said that the relief was real, but temporary. And he saw the pattern continuing everywhere. We can't get free of our violent rivalries until we find a scapegoat. And then we find that what binds us together is not mutual love. It's mutual hatred for the scapegoat, who is sacrificed for the remission of the sins our rivalries have produced.

The deadly cycle churns on today in the horrors of Gaza, in the passionate certainty that another violent response to violence is what's required to set things right. It's alive when a preacher says "Gaza" and we wonder whether he's on the side of the Israeli hostages or the starving Palestinian children. It seems we can become rivals even in compassion somehow. Who's to blame for problems closer to home? It's the immigrants. It's the Trump voters. It's woke elitists. It's the tech bros. It's the fundamentalists. A sliver of sacrificial thinking is alive as I drive home from church and hope the guy who cuts me off on Danny Thomas ends up upside down in a ditch. That would bring the moral universe back into balance a bit, right? On and on the old ways live on in us. We don't really think what matters most is for mutual love to continue. What we want is for someone to pay.

I'm sorry. It feels like you've asked about my summer, expecting photos from our walk in the Cotswolds, and I've just gone on way too long about a documentary I saw on the plane about the Battle of the Bulge. But, friends, I don't think this is all grim theological claptrap.

Hebrews is a wise old text that knows this broken world, and gets specific about how to live another way. It reminds us that strangers and immigrants have always been easy scapegoats. Mutual love shows them hospitality, expecting angels among them even. Prisoners—and the text does not say only the wrongly accused—prisoners should be visited, understood, humanized. If they've lost touch with some of their humanity, should the rest of it be destroyed in our punishment systems? Hebrews reminds us that, as a wise old saying puts it, no one wins a marriage. Same goes for all loving relationships. They can't run on sacrifice and score settling because that's just not love. And we hear yet again that we can't let money hold too much sway in our lives. Even our metaphors, when we're caught in the old sacrificial mindset, are economic, every time we say, "Well, somebody's gonna have to pay."

Hebrews insists we can choose the better part. A better way of life together that God's been drawing us toward, not just in Jesus, but from the beginning.

As you may know, there is sacrificial language in this very liturgy. We'll all end up being invited to receive the sacrament of Jesus's crucified body and blood. I wish we could just empty our liturgy and our lives of the language of sacrifice. But our deepest addictions and afflictions don't just go away when we stop talking about them.

The Biblical, gospel truth is not that, in Jesus, a God who requires blood for the remission of sins was finally satisfied. The gospel is about breaking the sacrificial systems that have defined just about every human society that ever was, including ours. As your new buddy Rene Girard put it, "Violence is unable to bear the presence of a being that owes it nothing—that pays it no homage and threatens its kingship in the only way possible." Which is to say, Jesus didn't die to satisfy the bloody requirements of a sacrificial universe. He died because he refused to live by its violent terms. He owed it nothing. He threatened the kingship of a North Wind world that tried to do him in with its cold, brute force, by paying it absolutely no homage. Returning its violence with only forgiveness, only mercy. Only love.

Could we learn to live his way? Live not in the cold winds of rivalry, demanding sacrifices, casting about for scapegoats for our troubles and our sins, but live by the light and warmth of mutual love? I'm sure we'll never do so perfectly. But one thing a little time away has made clear to this sinner is that I need you if the old patterns are to be broken in me. I need a community of people trying to listen to Jesus and to live by the light of his love. Being truthful about the ways we still think God or the Universe demands sacrifice, truthful about our own need for rivals and scapegoats, and laying it all down at this strange and subversive altar, so that we might keep learning a better way. So that we might make a different kind of sacrifice with our lives.

As Hebrews comes to a close, we read, "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." Such are the only sacrifices, friends, that God has ever desired. Isn't letting mutual love continue simply how the old cloaks of fear and scapegoating finally fall from our shoulders in the warmth of that merciful and loving Sun?