

**Epiphany 5B - 2/5/12
Grace St. Paul's**

She was a bouncy, highly exuberant, full of energy, off the wall, fun loving teenager. Those of you who have come to know my wife, know that this is Jean's favorite kind of kid. Of all the teens in Jean's group of marginalized youth, she was also the most intelligent. From the outside, it appeared as if Caroline had everything going for her. But once we met her family, we realized that nothing could be further from the truth. This became crystal clear the afternoon that Jean and I were given our first audience with Caroline's father. Since only the two youth in the family ever attended church, our visit was supposed to be about sharing information with the parents about what Baptism means in the Episcopal church. Caroline had decided months earlier she wanted to be baptized, and she knew her parents might be a little reticent about allowing her to do so.

We knew we were in a heap of trouble when we were ushered in by dear old Dad and instructed where to sit. Caroline was told to sit on the floor at her father's feet. The Dad, who we will call Bill, sat on the highest chair, overlooking his kingdom. He then took immediate control of the conversation. Rule number one. Fifteen year old, genius

level IQ Caroline was instructed to remain silent. She was a child, he explained, and would be allowed to listen to the adults only if she remained quiet. Then, before we had the opportunity to open our mouths, Bill told us that he had no intention of having his child brainwashed by religious fanatics. Later, he did ask us some questions, but each time we were interrupted before we could finish a sentence. Sometimes Bill remained calm while interrupting, and sometimes he was mildly irate. Each time he felt as if his point of view was being challenged, he would get up and stand over top of the offending speaker, staring at us menacingly. When Caroline finally did open her mouth and said, “Dad, why can’t I make this decision for myself?”, he raged at her for daring to question him. Then, he patted her on the head and told her in a soothing voice to “be Daddy’s little girl.” He explained ever so softly that she had to trust that he knew what was best for her.

Jean and my next confrontation with Bill came a few months later when Bill discovered that Caroline had smoked marijuana. He was waiting late on a Sunday night for us to arrive home with Caroline from Diocesan Convention. First Caroline was met by her mother, who

told her that she was heartbroken and would never trust her again on any subject for the rest of her life. Then Bill began drilling her. Caroline answered each question carefully, but honestly, which seemed to increase Don's rage. She told her mother that Bill had slugged her while she was away and her mother responded, "That is exactly what should happen to a liar." Then Bill leaned across the table, shouting at Jean and me at the top of his lungs. "YOU TRUSTED HER! YOU TOLD US SHE WAS GOOD! SEE, I TOLD YOU SHE WAS AN EVIL CHILD! AREN'T YOU GLAD I STOPPED HER FROM JOINING YOUR CHURCH! YOU DON'T WANT LIARS THERE!" Bill went on to relate a story from his days in Philadelphia. A policeman came across a man beating a 14 year old girl in an alley way. The man explained that his daughter was a whore and a drug addict and he was beating some sense into her. He said he would rather see her dead than an addict. The policeman responded, "I didn't see anything", and left the scene. It was Bill's perverted way of justifying what was about to happen. Without warning, he flew across the table, both fists aimed at Caroline's face. While Jean pulled Caroline out of harm's way, I moved in front of Bill's fists.

The story of Caroline's family is the most classic real life example I have ever encountered of a family model described by Edwin Friedman in his ground breaking book, Generation to Generation; family process in church and Synagogue. The role of Caroline in her very unhealthy family was to be the "black sheep." No matter what Caroline did, no matter how many continuous straight "A" report cards she received, no matter how many times we or her teachers informed Caroline's parents of her many gifts, she was wrong. In fact, her parents continued to describe her as evil. Friedman describes how many families simply cannot function unless one person in the group can always be blamed for everything that goes wrong. In the case of Caroline's family, there were two children. To this day, Caroline's younger sister has never done anything wrong, according to her parents. She is the good child. The parents also believe that they never make mistakes either. But to this day, though Caroline lives as far away as possible from her parents, she remains the evil person responsible for everything that has gone wrong in the history of the family. To make this case even more Machiavellian, Bill makes his living as a psychiatrist.

This insidious system is as ancient as it is malignant. It spreads, as Friedman's title tells us, from Generation to Generation. And it is found not just in family structures, but in every type of organization. I have, for example, seen otherwise vigorous churches completely destroyed when black sheep family process invades them.

My guess is that it has been around as long as humanity has existed. We know for certain that family process was part of the biblical world-view, from the beginning. The ancient Hebrews understood that whenever a family, clan, or whole nation was suffering, it was because someone in the group had screwed up. The huge majority of the laws in Deuteronomy and Leviticus were written because they believed that God punished all of them for the sins of any of them. To alleviate their own suffering, the only solution was to eliminate or remove the offending person, like Bill did with Caroline. We hear this ritually explained in in Leviticus 16. "Then Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into

the wilderness...The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.”

Of course, that is the origin of our word scapegoat, the person or thing in which we blame for all of our problems. This scapegoat is the basis of the purity code that we discussed last week. Whenever anyone in society transgressed or did not stay within the code, they had to be removed from society to protect everyone else. Obvious examples were lepers and people with evil spirits, like we heard in last week’s Gospel and again today’s. But anyone who was not whole, who suffered from any sort of infirmity also had to be removed from their position in society. The fact that Simon’s mother-in-law was in his house in today’s Gospel may mean that she was a widow with no living family members to care for her. As such, what her healing does is restore her to her place in the family clan. That’s why Mark finds it important to note that after her healing she was able to take over her role in the family of serving. What he is saying is that she has been restored to her place in the family. By healing her, what Jesus does is re-socialize her, taking her off the margins of the society, where she was placed because of her illness, and giving her life back.

Giving people another shot at living a dignified life is a wonderful gift. But what I find so compelling about both last week's and today's Gospel, is what else happens as a result of the healings. Both the demon possessed man and Simon's mother-in-law were scapegoats, they were black sheep. They were carrying the sins of the people and had therefore been removed from their place in society. So by reestablishing them as citizens again, what Jesus does is take away Capernaum's scapegoats from them. Jesus therefore, is not just saving the demon possessed man and Simon's mother-in-law from marginalization. He is attacking the very system that created their suffering. He's not just saving people like Caroline, he is simultaneously extinguishing the power of madmen like Bill. When families or societies are forced into the realization that the person they have scapegoated is not really the source of their pain, they must find an alternative way to explain their own suffering. What this does is not only bring healing to the scapegoat, but to the entire family or society or culture or government or church.

As we discussed last week, the key in interpreting Mark's Gospel

is that he, first and foremost, sees Jesus as a teacher. If we hear this Gospel and think, Wow, Jesus is the greatest healer ever, I believe in him, then we have missed Mark's point. Note that every time Jesus does a healing of any sort in Mark's Gospel, he asks that no one talk about it. That's because Jesus knows that if we focus on him as healer, we are going to miss the point. The importance of this story is not that Jesus can heal someone or that Jesus can render someone like Bill powerless. No, what Mark is trying to tell us is that WE can do these things.

When we understand that lesson from Jesus today, we have reached the next level of Christian life. We have moved from right belief to right action. But Jesus tells us today that even right action is not enough. It is not enough for us to put our faces in front of fists to protect Caroline. We need to break down the social system that has created Caroline's predicament in the first place. We need to move beyond just caring for those who are suffering, to discovering the root cause of their pain. Then we need to extract the fangs from people like Bill. To do this, Jesus teaches us that we must move beyond the

symptom, or the identified patient, as Friedman calls the scapegoat, to why there is a black sheep in the first place.

Scapegoating continues to be a major cause of suffering in today's world. I see families stuck in a system like Caroline's nearly every week. When the late Jerry Falwell declared that "AIDS is not just God's punishment for homosexuals; it is God's punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals.", he was expressing part of Christianity's continued belief in a theology of the scapegoat. Some might suggest that at least we have moved beyond the naive theology of the first century that Jesus attacks in today's Gospel. But if we are so enlightened about the mentally disabled or those with physical illnesses, how do we explain the continued use of mental institutions? The truth is, we still want to separate ourselves from the physically and mentally ill. Herein also lies the root of our seeming inability in Western society to openly speak about death, as well as our ongoing desire to separate ourselves from our own senior citizens by placing them into special living facilities.

In these cases, no social analysis is necessary for us to discover the root cause of individual suffering. It is the same scapegoating

issue that Jesus faced. All we need to do to solve these issues is to follow Jesus' example. By re-socializing everyone that our families, churches, and culture have set aside, we too can force our world to confront the idiocy of a system that still acts as if we can solve our own problems by placing blame on another.

But what do we when the root cause of suffering has nothing to do with the black sheep complex or scapegoating? How might we discover, for example, the root cause of someone's endless poverty, and go about changing the system that created it?

Well, before the Gospel closes, Jesus offers us a methodology to do that. He will follow this procedure throughout his ministry. First, he actively engages in his ministry by caring for the marginalized and attacking the system that created their suffering. But after doing so, he retreats from the scene out into the desert. There he stays for quiet prayer and reflection. After this time of study and renewal, he returns to the real world, expanding upon his previous ministry with new ideas.

Action - prayer - reflection - action. This is the continuous circle that Jesus teaches us to practice. Some of us see the problems of

society and believe that if we don't continually keep up the fight, we are going to lose the battle. (Me) But not even Jesus can discover the root cause of individual suffering without taking time to analyze and pray. Others, and this is especially true of Episcopalians, would prefer to spend the rest of life analyzing and studying each social issue, without ever returning to the real world to face them. Instead, reflection must always lead us back to action.

When the problems around us seem too insurmountable to do anything about, when we feel overwhelmed with the pain of life and the suffering around us, when it seems like all we are doing is putting band-aids on heart attacks, remember these great lesson of Jesus. How did he end marginalization? One person at a time. How did he attack the system of scapegoating that created the suffering to begin with? One person at a time. What did he do when he had no answer to the root cause of someone's suffering? He retreated to the desert for reflection and renewal, analyzing the root cause of the problem. Then he was back at it, applying what he had learned to eliminate another cause of suffering.

Using this simple methodology, Jesus was able to change the world. And what he teaches us today is that we can do the same thing. Let us not be overwhelmed by the challenge. All of us can save one scapegoat at a time. And all of us can render impotent one power monger at a time. All the Caroline's of the world deserve to live full lives and all the Bill's of this world must be stopped before they ever take away one more person's spirit. Amen.