

A Love Exposed by Violence

Easter 7C May 16, 2010

After she woke up, a woman told her husband, "I just dreamed you gave me a pearl necklace for our anniversary. Since today is our anniversary, what do you think it means?" "You'll know tonight," he said. That evening the husband came home with a small package beautifully wrapped and gave it to his wife. Delighted, she opened it--to find a book entitled "The Meaning of Dreams."

Both this morning's reading from "The Acts of the Apostles" as well as the one from the Gospel of John invite us to look for and recognize the power of God operating in and through and all around us; they invite us to look for the Sacred as the Christ breaks into and changes our world and our way of seeing. One of the questions that haunts me is the prevalence of human violence. Why do we so very often hurt others? Why do we do injury to the people we care most about? Why are we so quick to divide a congregation, assassinate the reputation of a colleague, or go to war against another group or nation? Why is the love of God, the ethic of unity, patience, charity and tolerance not dominant in our world?

(Drawn from: "Rene Girard's Theory of Violence, Religion and the Scapegoat" by Jeramy Townsley - Dec. 2003) There have been many theories to explain the origins and pervasiveness of human aggression and violence. I want to share one of them with you this morning. Rene Girard, a French philosopher and literary historian, studied contemporary fictional texts and mythology which led him to develop a theory of "**acquisitive mimesis and rivalry**" as the origin of all violence. Girard proposes that much of human behavior is based on "**mimesis**", an all-encompassing expression of **imitation**, but focuses on **acquisition and appropriation** as the object of mimesis. He describes a situation where two individuals desire the same object; as they both attempt to obtain this object, their behavior becomes conflictual, since there is only one object, but two people. "Violence is generated by this process; or rather, **violence is the process** itself when two or more partners try to prevent one another from appropriating the object they all desire through physical or other means."

Whenever one person sees another person attempting to acquire some object, those around him/her will also begin to desire that object and attempt to acquire it. To help illustrate Girard's theory, let us create an allegory focused on Dr. Arnold and his student, Sylvester. In the process of desiring an object, Dr. Arnold is a "**model**" for the subsequent observer, Sylvester. In desiring something, Dr. Arnold has the potential to invoke desire for that object in Sylvester. Sylvester may not have ever considered wanting the object. However, on witnessing Dr. Arnold wanting the object, regardless of its worth to Sylvester, **an instinctual drive is triggered in him** that causes him to mimic Arnold's desire. That is the inherent nature of mimetic desire--it is a drive that is "provoked and defined by the pull of the acquisitive actions and intentions of the other."

In the process, Dr. Arnold has been attempting to write a grant for a Lilly Endowment for his teaching project. Sylvester, seeing this process, realizes his need for this same grant. On his journey to a difficult market of tenure, Sylvester becomes aware that he needs what Dr. Arnold is seeking--a prestigious grant. He has learned what he is to desire from his model, who is also called "the mediator", since Sylvester's desire for the grant is mediated through Dr. Arnold's modeling and can only be attained by Sylvester learning the process of acquisition from Dr. Arnold. **At this point, we have "acquisitive mimesis", because currently they both desire only the grant--Sylvester imitates Dr. Arnold's desire to acquire the grant.** This stage is also known as "**external mediation**" because Sylvester's expressed desire is for the external object of the grant. As their desires intensify, their actions toward achieving the object of their desires similarly intensify. Their desires intensify because desire is mimetic.

Dr. Arnold sees that Sylvester desires the grant, thus affirming for Dr. Arnold that it is something worth desiring. Dr. Arnold knows Sylvester's high competency, so values his opinion, just as Sylvester values Dr. Arnold's opinion. **As our two actors increase their efforts to get the grant, they begin to focus on each other** and their focus is shifted away from the grant itself. This becomes an "**internally mediated**" event, because Sylvester is now **hiding the true focus of his desires**--to beat Dr. Arnold. They both become the model and obstacle for the other person and their desire is no longer simply for the object, but for the prestige of winning over the other person. The situation has now progressed into "**conflictual mimesis**", since they are no longer focused on acquiring the grant but on competing with each other. They become "doubles" for each other as they both continue to mimic the rising intensity of the other.

Dr. Arnold and Sylvester, as opposed to following through with their subconscious impulses to destroy each other, they refocus their conflict outward. The reidentification of their original desire to acquire the grant mobilizes them as a unit to lash out against a new, fourth component of this scenario. Arnold and Sylvester look past the grant and now see what they perceive to be the "real" cause of their violent obsessions (perhaps even some violent outbursts): **the scapegoat**. This scapegoat is, according to Girard, **an arbitrary victim**: "The creature that excited [their] fury [,the grant,] is abruptly replaced by another, chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand." Arnold and Sylvester have become focused on a single goal, which is to eliminate the violence that has developed between them. Since it is inappropriate for them to kill each other, and would possibly jeopardize their careers to start maligning each other to the rest of the faculty, they must choose someone else to attack. There happens to be, in this particular department, an Iraqi woman, Joan, hired just this semester to teach Muslim studies. Joan is herself Muslim, a recent immigrant to the United States, "claiming" to be seeking refuge from Hussein's oppressive regime. However, Dr. Arnold and Sylvester know better (though they have only their intuition and "common-sense" to support their beliefs). They know/believe that she is a spy sent to undermine the University, the minds of their students and the safety of the American people. They realize the impending threat of this woman and immediately decide that she must be given over to her ultimate and deserved fate. Accusations are made, Joan is investigated by the FBI and brought before a University Disciplinary Hearing where she is dismissed from her teaching responsibilities. So with the intensity of the department faculty's fervor and the student body to cheer them on, they tossed Joan onto the pyre and sacrificed her to the gods of Jingoism and National Security. As quickly as it started, the uproar was over. The process of the cessation of violence seems to occur magically, the community idealizes the situation and recreates their memories of the events that led up to the cessation of violence.

Within this process, the victim that was murdered is now remembered as the cause of the society's problems. Such would be self-evident since, now that that person is dead, all of the community's problems have also died. Therefore that person was obviously the cause of all of the violence. Paradoxically, this victim is often deified. Not only was the victim the cause of the violence, but, since this victim was sacrificed, s/he also becomes the salvation of the community, **since sacrificing the victim becomes the method of ending the violence**. So the victim is surrogate because s/he was sacrificed instead of the entire community being sacrificed. According to Girard, this is the power of the story of Jesus - to show us clearly the process that leads us to injure and murder those different from ourselves and to invite us into lives of love and compassion, lives that express our capacity to see our murderous rivalries and our need for scapegoats. Once again, we are invited to open our eyes and to choose to live and love as followers of Jesus, as people who see the unity of all things in and through the love of God. Once again we are urged away from "us vs them" thinking. Once again, we hear the prayer of Jesus echoing in our hearts: "I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one." AMEN.