

Zion's UCC of Taborton  
Fourth Sunday After Epiphany  
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Casting Out Demons

Unless you have been vacationing on some other planet, you have to have been following the Congressional follies down in Washington D.C. to some extent. Immigration, spending, investigations, no matter what tune is played they do the same dance. To me, it seemed like each member was much more interested in attaching blame to someone other than themselves, rather than actually solving the problem. I am especially disgusted with that group who say that it's all the fault of those kids who were brought here by their parents from another country That they are "illegal". No child is illegal!

The argument going back and forth remind me of a middle school playground dispute. "" No I'm not!" "Yes you are". "If I am than you are Too!" But, I suppose it's just a human trait to think: We're in a mess, but it's not my fault. It's their fault. One of our greatest fears is that we'll get blamed for whatever happened, and that's especially true if we know in our hearts that we're at least partly responsible for the mess.

That was certainly the case in our reading today from the Book of Leviticus. The ancient Hebrews were no different than us. They continually made mistakes, big and small. But they had a good out: the scapegoat. Two similar goats were chosen and then the high priest either drew straws or tossed dice to see which goat would be the scapegoat. They thought, just like in Las Vegas, God controlled the dice, so it wasn't just random. The community's shortcomings were then symbolically put upon the poor scapegoat and it was driven out into the wilderness. The theory was that they were sending all the evil back to its source— Azazel. Azazel, according to Jewish mythology, was the head of the goat demons, and the goat demons were the ones who caused people to do bad things. Azazel was a Prince of evil second only to Satan. Goat gods or Demi-God's were quite common in the Eastern Mediterranean at that time. Think of the Greek god Pan or any of the satyrs of their mythology.

I am always frustrated when we put the cause of evil outside ourselves. Wasn't me! The devil made me do it (as the old comedian Flip Wilson used to say). Must have been a goat demon because I would never do that. **(Pause)** We don't need any help to do bad things. Human beings are quite capable of great acts of goodness and great acts of evil. We just don't want to accept the responsibility for either.

I Also find it interesting that the pure goat, the Lord's chosen, was immediately slaughtered as a sacrifice. At least the scapegoat stood some chance of avoiding predators and getting away, but not the "pure" one. Guess they felt the need to get rid of both the one who was very good as well as the one who was very bad.

It was a very handy ritual wasn't it? You and I are having a dispute and I have said and done some really nasty things to you. But, I put all my evil on the scapegoat and I am cleansed. Wasn't my fault. Azazel made me do it. You can't be mad at me anymore. And, you probably go along with it because you have said and done things as well, if not to me then certainly to others.

In many respects, it is good to let go of past hurts and start again. Some people have a hard time letting go of past events. They let them fester inside them. But, it is not good to transfer the fault to others. We are all in this together and we all need to take responsibility when things go south.

Anthony DeMello relates a story of two Monks who were traveling to a new monastery. Both had pledged themselves to a life of poverty, chastity and self denial. They came to a river and found a beautiful young woman crying on the river bank. Like the monks she needed to cross, but the water was too deep for her. One of the two monks lifted her up onto his back and carried her across to the other side.

His fellow monk was totally scandalized. For two hours as they continued their journey, he lectured the monk about his negligence in keeping to the rules. How dare he touch a woman? What would people say? Had he not brought their faith into disrepute? On and on he went. The offending monk listened patiently to the other's never ending pontificating. Finally he said: "Brother, I dropped that woman on the river bank. Why are you still carrying her?"

Think about that story this week, because I have seen a little of that here at Zion's. I hear words that make me think that some would like to continue carrying the past, when we need to set it down on the river bank. I hear that some may want to scapegoat certain individuals. Lots of mistakes were made during the time your interim was here. Some of it was institutional. The way things were done. Some of it was personal. Responsibility for it all is widespread, both for the things that were done and the things that were not done. It would be very convenient if we could all heap our sins for what happened on the backs of a few and then drive them out into the wilderness. Convenient, but wrong.

If I have learned one thing in my time here, it is that everyone connected to this congregation wants it to thrive. Where we sometimes differ is in how to make that happen. You may not have noticed, but there are some strong, assertive personalities here at Zion's. Sometimes so strong and assertive that others get bowled over. So my insight on this is that we all need to remember our common goal to make this Christian Community an example of what God's reign can be. Some things work and we incorporate them into our tradition. Other things don't work and so we try something else. I am a person who likes to tinker. I like to change things and see how they come out. Sometimes what I do is a mistake. I would hate to live in fear that anything I do wrong would destroy the Covenant Pat and I Have with this community.

Let the past be the past. We can learn from our mistakes and handle things differently in the future, but we do not need to carry them with us like that unhappy monk. Nor should any of us,

regardless of our view of recent events, berate our fellow members for what we think they did wrong. As Jesus said: "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone".

The Muslim mystic Abu Hassan Bushanja exposed another aspect of scapegoating when he wrote: "Each time I chew on the sins of others, I suspect the chewing gives me more pleasure than the sinning gives the sinner ". Let me repeat that so you hear that statement clearly.

Our Gospel story this morning reflects how we, as followers of Jesus are supposed to confront our inner demons. We know when we are not living up to our discipleship, but we would like to keep our shortcomings separate from our faith. So we scream out: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?". The answer, of course, is everything. We cannot separate our faith from our everyday living. If we are to be receptive to the divine spark within us, then we have to do a little spiritual remodeling to make room for it. The anger, the need for retribution, the jealousy and all those other negatives, call them demons if you want, need to be pushed out. It might not be easy, but it is what we are called to do.

It doesn't matter who wanted to do what in the past. What matters is what we all want to do now and in the future. Will you spend your time carrying around old unhappiness or will you become part of a new effort to assure that all Are Welcome here at Zion's UCC as our hymn proclaims.

It's time to cast out those old demons and live as God would have us live.