

*July 28, 2019; University Lutheran Church, Cambridge, MA  
Sermon by the Rev. Greg Mileski*

*Texts for the day: Genesis 18:20-32, Psalm 138, Colossians 2:6-15, Luke 11:1-13*

There's a curious claim in these readings: that Jesus disarmed the powers and authorities and triumphed over them. How could Paul say that he "disarmed" those who killed him? And yes, he was resurrected, which is a triumph of sorts, but is it over them, they who live long lives in palaces, imbued with the power of Empire?

I promised myself that if I were to go back to academia and keep preaching, that I would never be one of those who preached about theorists and academics. Ugh, how dry! But then again, I swore, I'd never go back to academia, so... I'm a liar!

In the 1960s, French-American philosopher René Girard developed a set of theories around religion and violence and—crucially—personal identity. We learn from our world, he said, to build our identities based in rivalry with one another. We learn to want what others want and work to acquire it—and sometimes work to keep others from acquiring the same. Sometimes these are obvious physical things—precious stones, square footage, whatever—and sometimes they are abstract—status, power, prestige. Whatever our social circles, we are learning what to want from others, and then seeking to define ourselves as the ones who have it. Now, obviously all this rivalry would descend into a warren of conflict, if not for some other mechanism. Enter, Girard said, the scapegoat—some marginal member of society that everyone unites against. "Here is the cause of all our ills!" And once this one is cast out, an illusory—and so temporary—peace ensues. The scapegoat, then, becomes a source of unity for a people and a source of identity for individuals. The people are united against some other and each person builds a bit of their self-understanding as "not that."

It won't take much to recall some of our national scapegoats. They figure prominently in grainy political ads every four years, often with warnings about the downfall of civilization. But of course all of this happens on an individual level, too, and each of us will have to consider that question for ourselves—who it is we define ourselves against, who it is we cast out of our concern, who it is that we might be tempted to sacrifice—even if only by ignoring and neglecting them—for a kind of illusory peace.

The Christians in Colossae seem to be experiencing the other end of this dynamic. They are being pushed aside and marginalized—ostensibly because of their religious practices, or lack thereof, but perhaps more importantly, because it is common practice of human beings to find a reason to cast others aside and then out. Paul tells them not to feel alienated by their actions and so, the letter strongly implies, do not respond in kind.

And while the specifics of this come at the end of this passage—new moons, visions, puffed-up philosophies—the thrust of Paul's exhortation to them is what comes before, when Paul tells them that their identity is found elsewhere. "As you have received Christ, be rooted in him." Baptism, Paul tells the Colossians, reveals a deeper identity than the ones we learn to forge from the world. As the world tells us to build our identities outcast by outcast, brick by brick of those we have determined we are not, Paul tells the Colossians that their identities are found elsewhere, rooted in the one in whom the fullness of divinity dwells. That identity cannot be assailed by the slings and arrows of whether or not we possess the right things or hold the right

status and position. That identity is deeper than the rivalistic exercises that so easily and so often pit one against another and all against one. Secure in this identity, even death cannot change who we eternally are.

That, and only that, can be the meaning of this strange phrasing, that in Christ God has disarmed the rulers and authorities of the world. It is not that Pilate or Herod have lost their positions, or that any other in power isn't still right there. It is that this power to cast out, this power to marginalize, even this power to put to death, cannot change what God says is forever true. The defeated powers and authorities here are not Herod and Pilate, but the workings of a false game, of a hollow effort—if even at times painful effort—to define ourselves in opposition to one another. In the resurrection of Christ, God reveals that the promise of God's eternal love, the promise to which we are united in baptism, is that which truly and most deeply defines who we are and so defeats any powers or authorities that say otherwise—even, remarkably, miraculously, unbelievably, the power of death.

People of Colossae, people of America, people of UniLu, do not believe anybody who tells you that you do not measure up, that your name is anything less than beloved child of God. Do not believe anybody who tries to tell you that you are pushed aside, for you are held in eternity, rooted and growing, in the divine love of God. You have identity from elsewhere. You have an identity from eternity. You have an identity in the One in whom the fullness of divinity dwells.

That is a liberating word indeed. That declaration is the divine permission to step away from so much of our destructive social patterns. That word allows us to hold to an identity that need not be built by finding those we are not, by pushing aside any—it need not be built at all. That word allows us to believe that we are who God says we are: beloved children of the Divine.

And it is this truth, this unending love that defines us, that shapes the way we see everything else. Our priorities are shaped by this truth, grow out of this truth.

“May your name be holy and may the blessings of your eternal rule be made manifest here on earth. And do not let us fall into the temptation of building our identities on anything but the holy name you have given us.”

It is from this ground, and only from this ground, that Jesus can speak those promising words, that, those who ask from this ground will receive, that those who search from this ground will find, that those who knock from this ground, will see the door to God's Reign opened.

Anytime we are willing to risk the names and identities the world cherishes for the sake of another, we bear witness to this truth. Anytime we are willing to be shamed by others by standing up and revealing the scapegoating of others to be a sham, we bear witness to this truth. Anytime we resist the temptation to define ourselves against others, even those who seek to push us away, we bear witness to the truth that the only lasting identity to be had in this world is found in these words: You are a child of God and nothing can ever change that. Amen.