

# **Less Scapegoating, More Gardening**

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## **Introduction**

It's an honor to have been trusted to share with you this morning. Anne, when you reached out to me about speaking at this event, you had me at "kinship."

As an Anabaptist, kinship is important to me as I practice the things that make for peace and turn enemies into kin.

As someone who offers spiritual care weekly to people as they die in the hospital alone, I think about how we as a society desperately need to expand our notion of kinship beyond bloodlines.

As a Wild Church practitioner and someone married to a horticulturalist, I think re-awakening to our kinship with the more-than-human world is just about the most important work of our time. Kinship is belonging in a world of relations, not competing in a world of enemies. As geologist Thomas Berry has said, it is moving from seeing the world as disconnected objects to a "communion of subjects."

This morning, I want to explore how we can build communities of kinship in our spiritual and social lives. First, I'm going to share a story. Then, I'm going to introduce a theory. After that, we'll bring that theory to a passage from Luke's Gospel. Finally, we'll sketch some implications for building communities of kinship.

## **The Lottery**

It was her first real teaching gig. Ms. M. had a passion for literature, and she was eager to share her enthusiasm with her new students. Over the course of the year, she exposed me and my fellow classmates to the exciting and daring world of literature. She introduced us to advanced literary theory, stretched our vocabularies, and challenged our most basic preconceptions. She called us to the edge of our comfort zones and beckoned us ever further.

The most memorable piece we read that year was Shirley Jackson's masterful short story *The Lottery*. The story is set in a small, 300-person village in New England. The narrative

follows the gathering of the entire town in their central square for an annual lottery. Each family in the village submits a ballot, and one family is chosen. Then, each individual family member submits a ballot, and one person is selected. The story's climax occurs when the whole town participates in stoning the "winner" to death.

To further engage us in this text, Ms. M. decided our class would create and carry out our own lottery. As a class, we summoned our most sinister thoughts and thoroughly enjoyed coming up with a fate for our "winner." On the day of the lottery, however, the class's collective enthusiasm waned. As the event approached, the mounting tension proved too much for one of my classmates, who became visibly upset and burst into tears. Ms. M. escorted her out of the room.

As soon as she left, my friend Floyd hatched an idea to turn the tables on our teacher. By the time Ms. M. returned, we had flooded the ballot box with slips of paper bearing her name. As a group, our lack of statistical skills gave us a false sense of security. Not only was I wrong in thinking that Ms. M. would undoubtedly draw her own name, I was also wrong in thinking that I was safe.

So it was with disbelief that I slowly made my way to the front of the room when Ms. M. read my name from the tiny strip of paper she pulled from a hat. By the time I reached the "prize" at the front desk, my disbelief had turned to horror. I reached my hand out for the glass of raw eggs and mashed rotten fruit that had been decomposing, brewing, and cultivating fungi for weeks. Suddenly, Ryan leapt to his feet in protest, yelling, "This isn't right; he never did anything to deserve this."

As I drew the quivering cup to my lips, Stephanie, who was generally quiet, began to cry hysterically. I tilted my head back, and as the fuzzy, putrid concoction slid toward my tongue, Ms. M. lunged forward yelling, "STOP!" and abruptly ended our "lesson." Time seemed to slow down as I walked back to my seat in a daze. But it wasn't until I sat down that my eyes began to water. The tears were followed by deep sobs that emanated from the depths of my being and shook my entire body. My classmates tried not to stare, but I felt the eyes of my entire social world boring into me, as if I had been singled out by cosmic fate as especially worthy of humiliation.

Eventually, my face returned to its normal color, and my body's convulsions subsided. Looking back, I think Grade 4 was a bit early for the stoning story. As a 10-year-old, I'm not sure I was ready for such a traumatic example of sociological scapegoating.

That event became the source of my fear of public speaking—or public anything, really—for the first 25 years of my life. But more recently, it's been one of the ways I've come to understand the work of René Girard.

## **The Origins and Unraveling of Scapegoating**

René Girard was a French literary critic and philosopher who died in 2015. Born in France, Girard moved to the United States in 1947 and earned a PhD in history. He then took a position teaching at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, where he was asked to teach French and literature. In preparation for his courses, Girard began reading widely and began to notice a narrative pattern across a range of authors, including Cervantes (*Don Quijote*), Flaubert (*Madame Bovary*), and Stendhal.

As he read, Girard observed the characters' desires—their attractions—and noticed that an individual character's desire, whether for a lover or adventure, was not an essential desire. It did not well up from some personal, inner source, which is the more romantic understanding of desire. Instead, he noticed that the characters' desires came from someone else who modeled that desire. When Girard realized this, he saw it not only as a literary phenomenon but also as a human anthropological reality.

Girard's thesis was that our desires as humans are not our own—they are learned. He called this "mimetic desire." A common example used to demonstrate mimetic desire involves toddlers in a playroom full of toys. Imagine two children placed in a room full of toys, a few meters apart, backs to each other. Toddler A samples a number of toys—a rattle, a truck, a mirror—but then picks up a doll and begins playing with it, losing interest in the other toys. Meanwhile, Child B does the same, gravitating toward a red rattle and becoming enthralled with it.

When Child A turns around and sees Child B playing with the red rattle, all of a sudden Child A loses interest in the doll and feels an urge for the red rattle. According to Girard, Child A's desire is derivative of Child B's desire; it has little to do with the rattle itself.

I have a 13- and 16-year-old. The other night, they asked if we could go hiking. My wife and I had taken them hiking when they were little, sometimes reluctantly, because we wanted to instill a love of the outdoors. When my teens expressed interest, I asked my 16-year-old why the sudden interest. Was it the result of our early parenting efforts? No—he said it had become a TikTok trend. He had been watching videos of other teens hiking, and now he wanted to hike. Girard would say this is mimetic desire: his desire was generated by a model, the desire of others. We desire what others desire. Mimetic desire can be seen as a driving force in TikTok trends, romantic affairs, "keeping up with the Joneses," and even capitalism.

Girard noticed that mimetic desire can also be dangerous. Returning to the preschool playroom, Child A suddenly wants the red rattle that Child B has. Child A crawls over and grabs it; Child B bursts into tears and tries to take it back. They both clench their tiny fists

around the rattle, and a tug-of-war ensues. An observant adult intervenes, giving the red rattle to Child B and a blue rattle—identical in shape but different in color—to Child A. Yet Child A tosses the blue rattle aside and lunges for the red. It's not about the rattle; the desire of the other is being imitated.

When people desire the same limited object, envy and jealousy develop, along with rivalry, competition, and often violence. The conflict is rooted in the desire and actions of the other, not the object itself. When the desire of the other turns violent, we mimic that violent desire, mirroring the destructive impulses of our rivals. A vicious cycle develops, escalating violence and unraveling relationships and social fabric.

Girard observed that while animals also engage in rivalry—such as two male moose locking antlers over a mate—the fighting does not escalate in the same way as it does with humans. With most animals, the fighting ends when one rival submits. But mimetic desire among humans has a tendency to escalate to violence, with the desire for vengeance growing toward mutual destruction. This led Girard to wonder how the human species has survived despite mimetic rivalry.

Girard postulated that humans must have developed a mechanism to curb the crises that arise from the escalation of mimetic desire. This line of inquiry led him to develop a theory that when mimetic desire escalates, humans enact a social mechanism to preserve peace. For instance, a group of ancient humans comes across a grove of fruit trees and begins to harvest. When it becomes clear that there is not enough for everyone, factions form, alliances are made, and competition for exclusive access to the limited resource begins. Violence escalates, but in the frenzy, the group focuses on a single individual, projecting collective aggression onto this scapegoat.

The scapegoating mechanism turns the attention of warring factions onto one individual, whose elimination temporarily halts the conflict. Girard concluded that this is how mimetic violence is “cured.” Conflicted groups project guilt onto a scapegoat, whose sacrifice preserves the community through a form of sacred violence. This mechanism appears in literature, religion, and society, as in Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*, where an annual ritual sacrifice projects communal tensions onto a single victim. The peace it brings is not true peace; it merely masks the root problems of jealousy, rivalry, and inequality.

Girard came to the startling conclusion that religion and civilization itself are founded upon the scapegoat mechanism and the myth of redemptive violence. He saw this pattern in ancient literature: the Babylonian god Marduk kills his rival Tiamat and creates the universe from her body; Romulus kills his twin brother Remus to found Rome; the founding of North America involved uniting European ethnicities through the construct of race and the demonization and destruction of non-white peoples.

When Girard read Jewish and Christian scriptures, he saw the same pattern of redemptive violence and scapegoating, but with a key difference. In Biblical literature, the murdered one—the innocent victim—is not pathologized; God does not allow the victim to be vilified. After Cain kills Abel, God says, “Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground,” lifting up the voice of the victim and resisting the scapegoating mechanism. God then marks Cain to prevent further violence, stopping the escalation of mimetic desire.

Through the Bible, Girard traced a thread of resisting the scapegoating mechanism, siding with innocent victims and revealing the myth of redemptive violence while showing how humans can form kinship in non-violent ways. This is seen most clearly in the teaching, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

### **Luke 13:1-9**

In keeping with the Lectionary, we’ll look at a passage from Luke through a Girardian lens. At Estuary, we like to read Scripture Readers’ Theatre style. Our passage, Luke 13:1-9, has four parts: A Narrator, Jesus, a vineyard owner who’s feeling a bit grumpy, and a gardener. This is the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 13, verses 1-9.

Some who were present on that occasion told Jesus about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices. Jesus replied, “Do you think the suffering of these Galileans proves that they were more sinful than all the other Galileans? No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did. What about those twelve people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think that they were more guilty of wrongdoing than everyone else who lives in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did.”

Jesus then told this parable: “A man owned a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it and found none. He said to his gardener, ‘Look, I’ve come looking for fruit on this fig tree for the past three years, and I’ve never found any. Cut it down! Why should it continue depleting the soil’s nutrients?’”

The gardener responded, “Lord, give it one more year, and I will dig around it and give it fertilizer. Maybe it will produce fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down.”



Not long ago, the nation was under attack. In response to the threat, almost overnight, a wave of patriotism swept across the country. Flags were hung from windows and porches. Patriotic slogans and songs were everywhere—on bumper stickers, backpacks, and businesses. The national anthem was sung louder and more often. People were glued to the

news, and strangers struck up conversations in grocery store lines, drawn together by an invisible force. That's what it was like in the United States after 9/11.

Does it sound familiar? That's also exactly what happened earlier this year when Canada went "elbows up" after Trump launched his trade war against Canada and the world.



The gospel story we read is puzzling. The disciples are confused; they too were living under political threat. Current events were horrifying, the news cycle, relentless—one tragedy after another—and the disciples didn't know what to make of it.

They ask Jesus, "Did you hear the latest news from Washington—I mean Jerusalem? Did you hear what Pilate did now? Some of our people from Galilee were at the temple, and he slaughtered them in broad daylight during worship! What do you make of that, Jesus? Was it revenge for the rebellion in Galilee years ago? Were they up to no good, and Pilate was God's holy hand of punishment?" Like the disciples, we are just trying to make sense of the world in violent times.

"No, it wasn't their fault," says Jesus. Then he brings up another headline: "Did you hear about that terrible accident when the tower collapsed and killed eighteen people, right? What do you make of that? Do you think that was an act of God, too?"

When we encounter suffering, we look for meaning. When under threat, we want to sort the world into good guys and bad guys. When the unexpected happens, we want to know why. Answers restore a kind of predictability, order, and control in the world. The disciples are searching for answers in a confusing time. They grasp at some traditional theology that says suffering is a direct result of sin.

"No, that's not it," says Jesus. The Galileans who were killed weren't bad guys, and neither were those poor people who the tower fell on. And then Jesus says this stark line—twice: "Unless you repent, you'll die too!" But what does it mean?

The disciples are trying to make sense of the violence around them. It seems they are caught up in some death-dealing discernment. Jesus seems to be saying that the way they are trying to make sense of the violence around them is dangerous. Be careful about the meaning you make, warns Jesus.

What is it that the disciples are doing that is so dangerous? How can we not get caught up in death-dealing responses to the chaos around us? How can we make kin—and not

enemies—in the wake of violence? How can we resist forming communities built on scapegoating, dehumanizing, and supremacy?

When the massacre at the temple happened, the disciples tried to create a superior in-group by identifying a morally inferior out-group. “Maybe they were the worst sinners in Galilee to get mowed down during worship,” they wondered. The disciples tried to create community and security by rallying behind judgment. Violence often creates an existential vacuum. It tears at the fabric that weaves people together and threatens our understanding of justice and order.

In the wake of violence, there is a force that pulls people back together. Think of it like this: when a bomb explodes, it pushes the surrounding air out and creates a vacuum at ground zero. The air rushes back toward the violent center to fill the void. Tragedy strikes at the temple, and it tests the disciples’ understanding of God, justice, and who the good people are.

Suddenly, they feel a pull—a tempting wind sucking them in to form community around the violent event. The glue of the new community is the common enemy. The temptation is to rally together behind the pointing finger that identifies the “bad guys.”

I hear Jesus warning his followers: beware the pull of meaning-making that produces superior ingroups and inferior outgroups. Resist the temptation to create community from a common enemy. Beware the allure of transcendence that elevates the noble above the less-than-human. Beware camaraderie rooted in rivalry and mimetic desire, for it will always pull you down to your opponent’s level, mirroring your enemy, returning violence for violence, an eye for an eye, a tariff for a tariff. “Unless you repent,” says Jesus, “you’ll all die.”

Girard called the force that pulls people to rally behind the finger of accusation, the magic that turns an innocent victim into a scapegoat, satanic – Satan being the accuser.

Jesus warns us. But can he also guide us? When chaos swirls and the powerful impose their will through violence, when violence tempts us to build community on the foundation of a scapegoat and formation of enemies, how can we build community by making kin instead of rallying behind a common enemy? What would Jesus have us do?

Well, in typical enigmatic fashion, Jesus tells us a story—a parable.

A quick aside on the genre of parables: the word “parable” comes from two Greek words, *para* and *ballo*. *Ballo* means “to throw,” and *para* is a preposition meaning “alongside.” Think parallel: two lines side by side. Parables are little stories where Jesus throws things down alongside each other, establishing a creative tension.

“There was a man who had two sons.” “Two people went up to the temple to pray...A Pharisee and a tax collector.” “There was a vineyard owner and a gardener.” Parables are not fables with a moral. Parables are stories with a fuse—a fuse that ignites, blows up our biases, messes with our frameworks, and asks us to build a more beautiful world.

The parable in our text is about a vineyard. Throughout the Bible, the vineyard is used as a metaphor for God’s people. God is usually the vineyard owner, hoping God’s people will produce the fruit of peace, mercy, and justice.

Jesus says, “A man owned a fig tree planted in his vineyard.” The disciples assume they know where the story is going. But then the vineyard owner comes to the gardener and says, “What’s up with this tree? For three years, I’ve been looking for fruit, and it’s still not producing. Cut it down—it’s a waste of space!”

The gardener stands up for the tree: “Give it more time. I’ll tend to the soil and nourish it. Give it another chance.” Sounds like a good gardener. Who else is referred to as a gardener in the Bible? Jesus. On Easter morning, Mary mistakes Jesus for a gardener.

If the gardener is Jesus in this story, who is the vineyard owner? God the Father? If Jesus is also God, then here we have God divided: God the Son trying to pacify God the angry Father.

Maybe something else is going on here. Parables are stories that subvert our expectations. They get us leaning one way only to cross us over, leaving us on our bums scratching our heads. Jesus sets us up to think the vineyard owner is God, who shows up every year for three years demanding fruit. But the Levitical law of *orlah* forbids expecting fruit for the first three years; only in the fifth year could you eat it.

So maybe the owner isn’t God at all. Maybe God is the gardener. Maybe the owner is simply someone quick to judge, quick to cut down life—violent, wealthy, impatient, hopeless. God the gardener, begs the violent man to repent and change his mind. A good God doesn’t stand above a rotten tree pointing a punitive finger. A good God gets on God’s gardener knees, rolls up God’s sleeves, and nourishes creation.

Jesus warns us against the temptation to judge too quickly, against the tendency to rally behind the pointing finger, against forming unholy communities built upon the cutting down of innocent life—scapegoated, killed, and buried beneath the myth of righteous or redemptive violence.

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Throughout Jesus' ministry, he stands in solidarity with society's scapegoats—man born blind, Bartimaeus. He counters the myths and theologies that say they were the problem. As he resists the scapegoat mechanism, the people who rely on it most get nervous and upset.

In the Gospels, we see tensions between Jewish and Roman authorities mounting, threatening to tear the social fabric apart. There is fear of escalating violence and Rome bringing the full weight of their imperial boot upon the Jewish people. Remember what Caiaphas says in John's Gospel after Jesus raises Lazarus? "It's better that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." Jesus becomes the scapegoat whose death pacifies not God's wrath, but the people's unrest.

The two factions—the Jewish and Roman authorities—come together to point their fingers at Jesus as the problem, the blasphemer, the troublemaker, the threat. They decide Jesus will be the one whose death keeps the Pax Romana—a false peace built on the bodies of the oppressed.

Jesus the scapegoat is buried, but on the third day rises again—not with vengeance in his heart, but forgiveness on his lips and peace in his hands. He is the scapegoat who will not be silenced.

The resurrected Jesus stands before the world on behalf of all innocent victims upon whose backs a false peace was brokered and unholy communities were formed. The resurrected Jesus reveals the scapegoat mechanism for what it is—not God's acts of justice, but humanity's acts of injustice.

Jesus shows us that God was willing to become society's scapegoat, to fall victim to our unjust game, in order to come back from the dead to teach us a new game—one not based on competition and rivalry, but on abundance and sharing; to teach us a new way to build community, not on the murder of an enemy, but on the creation of kin.

## **Building Kinship**

As I conclude, I want to borrow from some of Joanna Macy's language, from [The Work that Reconnects](#). Macy, who died this year at age 96, drew from spirituality—mainly Engaged Buddhism, deep ecology, and systems theory—to help create a framework for resisting despair and acting creatively in a time of polycrisis.

In order to move from communities founded and sustained on rivalry, supremacy, and violence to creating cultures of kinship, we can do at least three things.

First, we can engage in holding actions in defense of life. This is the “garden God” of Jesus’ parable. We can tend to those who are suffering under the old game of rivalry and scapegoating. Defense of life can take the form of acts of compassion—feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, sharing resources, visiting the sick and incarcerated—but it can also take the form of subversive direct action that throws sand in the gears of violence. My friend Floyd, for example, tried to subvert Mrs. M.’s awful lottery through his creative act of subversion. Defense of life can also be through acts of advocacy, like Ryan, who stood up and said, “This isn’t right!” through marching, letter-writing, and sit-ins.

Secondly, we can experiment with and invest in alternative life-sustaining systems that aren’t rooted in rivalry or competition. This could mean building mutual aid networks, pooling resources through benevolent funds, creating debt relief systems, or experimenting with gift economies in our churches.

Lastly, we can cultivate spiritual communities that welcome new insight, new readings of scripture, and irruptions of sacred wisdom that shift our collective consciousness. I’ll say that again: we can cultivate spiritual communities that welcome new insight, new readings of scripture, and irruptions of sacred wisdom that shift our collective consciousness. [James Alison](#), a Girardian scholar and one of my favorite theologians, speaks of humanity needing an “irruption”—not an eruption like a volcano where lava comes from the inside and goes out, but an irruption with an “I,” an in-breaking from the outside in. We can pray “Thy kingdom come,” asking for irruptions of divine insight that break through our biases and blow up our life-limiting spiritual constructs.

We need irruptions of wisdom so we can look upon the scapegoated and say, like the centurion at the cross, “This isn’t a criminal getting his just punishment. Surely, this is the Son of God.” We need divine insight to see who we scapegoat. The only way scapegoating continues is when people cannot see it. We need patterns of prayer so we can be like Peter on the rooftop in Joppa, whose theological and moral frameworks were deconstructed, whose biases were blown apart, to make room for more of God’s love. We need to pray that God would stop us in our tracks, like Paul on the way to Damascus, so we too might see how God is mystically and intimately in solidarity with those who suffer.

These are some of the things I think we can experiment with as we seek to move from communities founded on violence to communities of kinship.