18th Sunday after Trinity October 21, 1962

NO NEED FOR SCAPEGOATS

Genesis 3, 12-13

Whom do you blame? Who is at fault? Each one of us that is here this morning is an expert at answering those questions because we have been answering them for years, and will go on answering them many times each day for the rest of our lives. Our courts, law enforcement agencies, government, we in the ministry are all concerned with guilt professionally, but each of us as a private citizen is concerned with who is to blame and who is at fault every day of our lives. We will never escape these questions; they will pop up to hound and bedevil us for the rest of our lives. There are too people who actually take a peculiar delight in answering these questions. They go out of their way, spend all their time and energy trying to find out who is to blame, and who is at fault. And many times they are not too particular whether they put the blame in the right place or not.

The Lilly Foundation, sponsored by the Lilly Pharmaceutical Company is financing a study by three theological professors and a psychiatrist, working at University of Illinois, to determine if it is possible and correct to say that all mental and nervous disorders come from feeling of guilt. Their findings should prove to be very interesting, especially since guilt is already the culprit in many mental and nervous cases. We know how irritating it is when we cannot always put the blame where it belongs. If we could do this more often, maybe we would spare ourselves and others a lot of grief. If you look at your own life, and the great stories of tragedy and drama, you will not fail to see that man's greatest concern is always, ar has always been the matter of putting blame somewhere--and often where he would like to have it and not where it really belongs. It began in the Garden of Eden, that Paradise on earth, first Adam, then Eve, and it has been going on ever since. Of course since Adam's day, we have all learned a few things; We have learned how to be much more clever in "passing the buck", setting up a "smoke screen" and getting the blame misplaced. One of our greatest needs, we feel, is for a scapegoat, a person or things who can take the blame for us when we are suffering from feelings of guilt.

It takes a lot of something to be able to say, "I am the guilty party, I and no one and nothing else is to blame." You do not hear words like that too often. And since the arrival of sin, since the first time man knew what a guilty conscience was like, man has been busy inventing and concocting scapegoats, excuses, alibis for his own guilt. We know that guilt is about the most unpleasant thing you can possibly experience. Some people even say that guilt is more painful than pain itself. All of us know that a tortured and torturing conscience is nothing to be desired. It can take away sleep, deprive one of an appetite, make you lose weight, and generally get you so run down that you are fair game for any bug or virus. Feelings of guilt often form, so psychiatry tells us, the basis for many a neurosis, and often treatment consists in finding out for what the patient feels guilty and then removing the feelings of guilt, a process that sometimes can take years, so deep-seated the feelings of guilt can become over a period of time. Often it does come to that, that we'd rather take some kind of punishment, some kind of temporary physical pain or discomfort, rather than have that chewing, gnawing feeling of guilt with us the rest of our lives. When Dante wrote his "Divine Comedy", he described many of hell's torments as being the result of intense feelings of guilt, regret, remorse that damned souls felt.

It is no wonder that we are at such great pains to escape these guilt feelings wherever possible, and that we will often go to great lengths to shove guilt away from ourselves at any cost whatever. As we all know, some of us do this much easier than others do.

Adam and Eve are a good example of this sort of thing. They didn't know the meaning of the word punishment; there had never been anything like that in their experiences. Yet, the moment they ate that fruit, they had this unhappy, uncomfortable feeling all of us know so well, and they were determined somehow to rid themselves of this guilt, because they knew that if they didn't something even worse was going to happen to them when God found out

what they had done. Actually this is the most natural thing in the world, to want to escape blame and the consequences of blame. It's part of our self defense. I don't want to be called a failure, and I don't want to feel myself a failure, so I go around telling everyone how hard it is to work with the people I am associated with; how unreasonable they are, how difficult the times are, anything, rather than face up to the fact that through my own laziness I am a failure. This gets pretty deep after a time, because people can be pretty deep, education or no education. There are a thousand and more tricks of the trade for escaping guilt and making yourself comfortable; you and I have used many of them, ourselves. During the Spanish-American War, e.g., we have the story of Adm. Farragutt telling Admiral Dewey why he did not attack the Spanish fleet, and gave Dewey a long list of reasons; weather, position, etc. When he had finished, Dewey said, "You still haven't given me the most important reason why you did not attack when you had the chance." "What is that?" "You didn't think you could do it," replied Dewey.

Not only do we want to escape guilt because it is so unpleasant, and wish there were some kind of shots we could take to make us immune to guilt, but we also try to avoid it because we like the opposite: appearing blameless and innocent to others and to ourselves. This is a picture we want to retain at all costs. If I as a teacher, e.g., refuse to face the fact that at certain times I am decidedly incompetent, and instead blame children, school board, other teachers, of course, this puts me in a very agreeable light. I wouldn't come out in so many words, of course, and say that I am the only one not to blame, but if others draw that conclusion from my criticism of everything and everyone else, of course, I can't help that, can I? And that explains the very strange fact that those who criticize loudest and longest and most severely are the very ones who themselves feel their own guilt most deeply. The more deeply you feel guilt, of course the harder you are going to try to get rid of it, and what better way than by finding a scapegoat, or a whole herd of scapegoats. Now, maybe some of our younger friends in the audience this morning do not know exactly what a scapegoat is. Well, if a little girl has been naughty and her mother has scolded her or punished her in some way, often she will take her doll or some toy and treat it very mean. She may take her doll or her pet cat and scold it. This doll or toy or pet has become her scapegoat. She is trying to make it suffer because she has been bad. Or you have often seen cartoons of angry, frustrated golfers throwing clubs, bag, everything into the pond. They are taking a very childish way of saying the clubs made them play a poor game, while all the time, they were just out of trim that day; they played a poor game, and it was their own fault, but they will not admit it. They want to think that if they only had a better set of clubs, or if only the course were laid out differently, they would have played a much better game, because, you see, they are really very good golfers.

And as you might have guessed, there are many ways of finding a scapegoat. I mentioned some of them already. You will look around, like the angry golfer, or the angry child for something to blame in your place. It may be the weather: "When the humidity is high, I'm just no good for anything". It may be health. One student was explaining to his professor why he had not completed a certain assignment. "I just wasn't feeling up to it, sir" was his reason. "Young man", was the reply, "you'll find that most of the things accomplished in this life really worth while were done by people who weren't feeling good." And, of course, as all of us know, there are always those who feel that a poor excuse is better than none at all, an excuse at any price, is their motto.

Of course, one of the best ways to find a scapegoat, some place to put the blame for your own faults, is to put it onto someone else. This both Adam and Eve did. Adam placed the blame on Eve, and Eve, in turn, placed it on the serpent. They were saying to God, in effect, "If it hadn't been for this other person or thing", I never would have done it." I'm not a cranky kind of person, but other people get on my nerves, and they make me that way. I'd be very easy to get along with, but life is such a rough-and-tumble affair that you have to be tough to stay in the competition. I would have turned out differently but I blame my parents, my neighborhood, my in-laws; if it hadn't been for them..!" Haven't you heard that line time and time again? Haven't all of us used it in some variant or another very, very often? And, when you can't find a scapegoat, then sometimes it gets desperate.

This was Cain's trouble. He couldn't find an excuse or something to blame for his predicament so he simply removed Abel from the scene as the source of his irritation, only to let himself in for even greater guilt. You remember his parting words as God sent him away, "My punishment is greater than I can bear."

You have, of course noticed that Adam was not above blaming even God and trying to make God the scapegoat and the reason for Adam's guilt. "The woman which you gave to be with me..." As if to say, "God, if you hadn't made her for me, she never would have tempted me, and I wouldn't be in the fix I am now. Really, I'm the innocent party, and you are the one to blame." If this sounds reckless and extreme, it certainly is. But it is no more than people are trying desperately to do today. This gives you some idea of how desperately we will try to escape guilt and all that goes with it. One common way of doing this with regard to God is to say He does not exist. If He does not exist, of course you are not responsible to Him, and if you are not responsible to anyone, how can you be guilty? And remember, no one of us is immune to blaming God. Even Elijah in a weak moment did this, when he asked to be taken because, as he felt, he was the only one left, even though he had been very zealous for God's work, and God, it seemed, had let him down. It is so easy to pass the blame onto someone else that we often do not realize that we are doing it at all. We have yet to see one political party, e.g., accept blame for the national debt, or even part of the blame; we have yet to see two quarreling factions accept even part of the blame for the friction between them; we have yet to see a family situation where the fighting members insisted on sharing the blame for the unhappy situation. There is always the desperate search for a scapegoat, and usually the person or thing closest at hand, (see text) is what gets to be the scapegoat. This is why people living close together, as members of a family have a handy list of candidates from which they can select a scapegoat to cover up their faults by blaming others.

But you don't need a scapegoat. Ever. God, as usual, way ahead of us, offers us One already tailor-made to fit our needs--all of them. That happens to be Jesus Christ. And if you think being the scapegoat for the whole human race is not exactly the nicest kind of a job to have, you are so right! In fact, it is the most unpleasant, unhappy, thankless, painful job imaginable. When St. John writes, e.g., in his first letter, 2nd chapter, 2nd verse, "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world," this is what is meant. God knows, even better than we, that we need not only a scapegoat, but a Savior; not just an alibi, but complete freedom from guilt altogether. And, as always, God is offering us much more than we could offer ourselves, even if we could successfully shift the blame for our mistakes onto someone else. So, each time you and I try to "pass the buck", as we say, we are wasting time, because this is just what God already did for us and provided for us in Christ. Christ was not only the Lamb of God--He was also the goat. This is the big message of the Bible to the guilty, and that means to everybody: "Look, you don't need to waste your time and energy running around looking for a scapegoat; you don 't have to find something or someone on which to pin the blame for your actions, because Christ has already been pinned, and pinned down on a cross at that, for your guilt.

This divine scapegoat Jesus Christ is a much better one than you or I could ever find. Reason: when you shift the blame for your boners onto someone else, you are still left often with a nagging feeling of guilt. Shifting blame doesn't always solve the problem. But with this scapegoat, Jesus Christ, there is no problem. What did God offer us as a proposition as quoted by Isaiah the prophet?: "Though your sins be as scarlet.." When Christ takes away guilt, and the divine punishment of guilt that would inevitably have to follow, He does a complete job. And when He does that, we must also remember that He is not an unwilling scapegoat. In other words, He is not going to turn around and resent getting saddled with all our guilt; He is not resentful of being blamed and punished for what we have done. He did it all gladly: "Not my will but Thine be done", He prayed. In our thinking, it is hard to believe that anyone would willingly suffer and be blamed for something he didn't do, but, as St. Paul says, "God commended His love to us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died <u>for</u> the ungodly." Quite a lot packed into that little preposition "for": Christ died <u>for</u>, i.e. in place of, in the stead of, as scapegoat for, the ungodly. That is quite a mouthful in any language.

But where does that leave us now? What happens when we go around looking for a scapegoat anyhow? What happens when we know we are guilty, and yet insist on blaming others for at least part if not all of the problem? Then we are saying "I don't believe God has provided me with a scapegoat; I've got to find my own." We are saying in effect, "It will be more to my advantage to find my own scapegoat." Now, I know none of us are going to say that in so many words, but you and I are still going to be caught in the position of Adam and Eve, ready to blame the nearest party or circumstance for what went wrong, forgetting that whatever we did do wrong has already been blamed on Christ! You never can get tired of exploring this glorious doctrine of the Atonement, can you! Imagine, I make a mistake, someone is hurt, or damage is done, and I have only to remember that Christ was both blamed for this and punished for it when He died on the cross! I don't have to find someone to blame; I don't have to worry about being haunted by feelings of guilt. My scapegoat has already seen to that; He is the "propitiation for my sins..."

You might want to shout a protest, as some have always done with this arrangement, and say, "But then that takes away all responsibility; I can do as I please, hurt whom I please, and I don't have to feel guilty. Is that right?" Not at all, because it misses the whole point. When you know someone has been very good to you, as Christ has been to us by being our scapegoat, naturally you aren't going to take advantage of His goodness, if you have decency about you at all, Naturally, you don't want to cause Him any unnecessary grief; naturally you don't want to offend someone who has done that much for you. Instead of saying that this great Christian teaching of Christ as our scapegoat-substitute takes away all initiative and takes away all sense of responsibility, the truth of the matter is just the opposite: we want now to try harder than ever to live as He would want us to; not out of fear that if we are guilty of stepping out of bounds we shall have to suffer for it, but just because He was willing to be our goat.

You can see, I am sure, how our whole teaching, and practice, too, of confession and absolution hinges on this very thing. How can I participate in the confession of sins each Sunday morning here in church, if I am still willing to blame others for my faults? How can I say I believe that God gave me a Savior-scapegoat, when I still insist on finding my own and blaming them or it? When you join in that confession of sins, or any confession of sins at any time, you are saying actually, "God, I'm taking <u>your</u> scapegoat; I'm confessing my guilt and laying it all on Him, knowing that as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us." There has never yet been anything designed or thought up like this divine Scapegoat, Jesus Christ, for making us honest people. Now we can afford to be honest; now we can quit being hypocrites, if that is what we have been by trying to shift blame that really belongs on our shoulders. Now we can be honest and say, "Yes, I am at fault; I am to blame for this sad state of affairs, "whatever it may be", and I know God has forgiven me what I have done, so let's go on from there." So, the next time you stand there and say, "Almighty God, our heavenly Father, we poor sinners confess unto Thee that ....we have sinned against Thee by thought, word, and deed...", When you say those words, always remember that is another way of saying that you are going to quit looking for a scapegoat, you are going to quit looking for someone else to blame for your failure, because you recognize yourself as guilty, and you accept God's offer of putting this guilt onto Jesus Christ. When you can say, "God be merciful to me, a sinner", and mean it, and then live it, not looking around any more for alibis, scapegoats or loopholes, then indeed you can go down to your house justified, cleaned, and forgiven. And there is no medicine, no therapy, no feeling, no accomplishment that can give you the satisfaction and the joy this can give. After all, there are much more enjoyable, much more profitable, and much more useful things for us to do with our time than to go around hunting for scapegoats, especially when we don't even need them any more in the first place!

Amen.