

**“Scapegoats and Cover-Ups”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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On Monday, August 24th, just a few weeks ago, Christi Gibson returned to her home to find her husband, John Gibson, dead. John Gibson, a 56 year old pastor and professor at the Baptist Theological Seminary in New Orleans, had, in a moment of deep depression and shame, taken his own life and left behind his wife and two children, Trey and Callie.

Less than a week before his suicide, John Gibson had been more than one of 30 million people whose names were leaked by hackers of the Ashley Madison website. This is the website where people who seek “no strings attached” extramarital affairs go to find their mates. Reverend John Gibson was not the first one to be “outed” by the Ashley Madison website scandal, nor was he the first person to commit suicide in response. As Leonard Pitts wrote in his recent column on this issue, “private sins now bring public consequences”.

The Ashley Madison website scandal brings up a whole variety of issues for our new web-based world, but at the core of this scandal and similar scandals that we read about each day in our newspapers, are the deeply biblical issues of sin and shame, mercy, forgiveness and healing. Christi Gibson revealed these core issues when she told a CNN interviewer, “What we know about John, my husband, is that he poured his life into other people, and he offered grace, mercy and forgiveness to everyone else, but somehow he couldn’t extend that same grace and mercy to himself.”

Our modern society deals with issues of sin and shame, grace and mercy primarily through the very helpful disciplines of psychotherapy and various other forms of counseling, but what biblical wisdom offers is something of a different source. Essentially, the Bible makes the case that sin, shame and separation from God are not simply the products of bad choices or weak moments, but are part of a primitive primordial force that is almost palpable on our world. That is to say that sin and its resultant guilt, shame and alienation do not lend themselves to simply rational resolutions because sin is the consequence of darker forces at work in our lives and our world, thus, when addressing consequences of sin, something more needs to happen besides just good therapy.

A major part of the ancient modern day Jewish faith is what was known as the Day of Atonement, better known today as Yom Kippur. The ancient rituals associated with Yom Kippur are found in Leviticus 16 which we just heard a moment ago. This text in Leviticus 16 is where we, of course, get the whole notion of the scapegoat. Atonement derives from a Hebrew word which means “to be at one, to agree or to be reconciled”. The Hebrew term Kippur means “to cover over, to make smooth again”, and in the Hebrew scriptures, the term is used to speak of the healing effects of offerings which are animal sacrifices that purge and purify the sin and pollution that infected the Israelite community so that, for Israel, who sins and pollutes, and Yahweh, their God who is offended by sin and pollution, the scapegoat rituals of atonement allow reconciliation between God and people, so Leviticus 16 is about priestly rituals of atonement which have two components to them.

The first component comes as an act of purgation which is purging, whereby the priest Aaron in this text, places upon the live goat all the sins of Israel which are then carried outside the camp by the goat so that the holy place is freed of pollution. In this tradition, you have to get the sin out of the camp.

The second part of this offering of this scapegoating mechanism of liturgy is offering of purification. You get the sin out of the camp on the goat, but then you have an offering of purification which is made so that the community is purified and can be forgiven, so these two acts of purging the sin from the community and then offering purification complete a liturgical process whereby Israel is freed of its sin and their holy place, their community, their Temple, their place of worship, is made habitable again for God. This ancient liturgical act, this act of the people restores right relations with God and allows for the continuation of life under blessing.

In modern day Judaism, the ritualized acts of atonement are, of course, no longer practiced, but Judaism continues to preserve and embrace these rituals through remembrance. Yom Kippur is a service of remembrance. It is a remembered festival which continues to have an immense power to reconcile the Jewish community with their God. This is a reconciliation that hits at the deepest and most profound levels of their existence. We, in the Christian tradition, do the similar thing on Good Friday when we remember the crucifixion for our own sense of healing.

In the early Christian church, in their attempts to understand Jesus, the New Testament appeals to the tradition of Yom Kippur by asserting that Jesus had displaced the older Jewish practices of atonement, so as Hebrews 10:10 asserts, Jesus has now accomplished atonement once and for all. They have replaced this ritual with the belief that Jesus is the one who atones for our sins, and we have turned this Christian notion of atonement through Christ into simply an article of belief. It is something many Christians hold dear and others are not so sure about but, nonetheless, this idea of atonement through Christ has none of the symbolic ritual that gave Leviticus 16 its true transformative, unexplainable power, so it raises the question: Beyond the ancient rituals of scapegoats and the purifying sacrifice of animals which we, of course, no longer do and will not do, and beyond the intellectual and spiritual proposition that Jesus is the new and final scapegoat for our sins, that we are saved through the blood, how do we find the atonement that we need? How do we find oneness with God that we so desperately need? How is it that we close that gap between the holiness of God and the sin and pollution within which we live and which lives within us? It is the struggle that we deal with—seeking to find Holy Communion with God, absence of any rituals to do it.

Heather Kopp is a Christian blogger and the author of a wonderful book called “Sober Mercies: How Love Caught Up With A Christian Drunk”. In a recent blog entry, she wrote this. She said “After I got into recovery from alcoholism, I came to understand that God’s intention was never to eliminate my sinful nature but to forgive from having one. As long as I am alive, my sinful self will never die, reform, or even go on vacation. With this in mind she writes, “These days I focus most of my spiritual energies on nurturing my real self, my beloved self, the self that was made in God’s image and can’t be tainted by sin. This is the self that is always saying yes to God and whose face is never covered with shame”.

We find atonement with God, not by denying our sinfulness. We find atonement with God not by pretending that we don’t have struggles or imperfections in our lives. We find oneness with

God, instead, by keeping our sinfulness close at hand, and conscious, and being honest about it. We have this temptation in our world to deny our own brokenness, and when we deny it, it has power over us, so what is suggested here is that we keep our own sinfulness right here on the table. It is like at an AA meeting when the speaker always says “Hello, I am an alcoholic”. It is about being honest about why we are here but, at the same time, when we keep our own brokenness close at hand and when we are honest about our own brokenness, we refuse to be defined by it. We refuse to let our own sin define who we are because we know that we are loved by God.

Heather Kopp writes “I notice that when people come to understand that they are not their sin, they are less likely to live in shame and more likely to fall with great relief and joy into the arms of God”. Had John Gibson known that and believed that in his core as his wife and family did, he would not have had to deal with his shame by an act of suicide.

Israel’s ancient rituals of scapegoats and sacrifices were the modes through which they kept their lives real. It was how they stayed honest about the sinfulness that was always hanging around in their community.

In our web-based world, as our private sins bring on bigger and more shattering public consequences, it will become more and more important for us to find new and powerful ways to be honest—honest about who we are and how we live and what we do. In being honest, we must never forget not only who we are but whose we are because we are, in the end--no matter what transgressions we make--God’s beloved children, forgiven and made whole, and the church always needs to be reminded that we are beloved by God no matter what and that we are called to share that message with the world. So, we are challenged not to go back to ancient brutal rituals of animal sacrifice but to recover what those rituals were about which was about having ways to remember who we are, to remember and to be honest about the struggles that we have in our lives, and to know that God, in the end, always calls us back, always offers us love and forgiveness, and always offers us wholeness to be God’s children. Thanks be to God on this day. Amen.