

On Scapegoats and Unforgiveness

My favorite professional publication, *Touchstone: a Journal of Mere Christianity*, besides offering hard copy publication also puts out weekly, Friday, electronic messages. On recent edition seemed, at least to me, especially pertinent, the tag line of which said: *Headline: Scapegoats No Longer in Season.*

An unknowable number of football fans were witness to Chicago Bears kicker Cody Parkey who "elevated himself to public enemy No. 1 after his missed the potential game-winning field goal against the Philadelphia Eagles." This unfortunate event was publicized widely such that folks not much into sports were made well aware of Parkey's missed field goal attempt. News outlets everywhere noted not only the incident but the outrage and contempt directed at Parkey. The response was not only instantaneous but vicious almost to the point of apoplexy. Failure had not been an option. "Boos rained down in Soldier Field, and angry fans... sent hate his way on every form of social media."

For those of us who didn't watch the game, as well as those who did, it is important to know a few important details evidently not factored in by those whose vitriol was unleashed on a fallible, but very qualified and talented, player. Bear in mind now the saying, "The devil is in the details." As it turns out, "Parkey's kick had been tipped by an opposing player, slightly, but enough to change the trajectory of the ball. The NFL official ruled the kick a blocked field goal. He didn't miss it. It was tipped."

The article goes on to note, rightly, that games are won and lost based on the collective whole, not the success or failure of any given person. Who can argue but that in every game every player's participation contributes to the end result? If a team is playing particularly poorly or excellently, the individual contributions of every player are reflected in the final score. A little more effort by the line could afford a team another first down or put a stop to the advancing opponent and thus potentially change the score.

But, it seems, none of this mattered in the slightest in the anger and heat of the moment. All that matters is winning. Failure is NOT an option.

The concept of "scapegoat" is found in Leviticus 16:1-34, and it centers around the issue of sin, consequences, guilt, and the expiation (or, atonement) of sin. One secular definition is "to make amends or reparations for." In a strictly secular situation, it might be something someone does to make amends or provide reparations for "sin" or offense committed. But in terms of God and our sin, from our Christological understanding, we know that no human can make sufficient amends for even the tiniest, least consequential sin with the greatest and most of what we have to offer. Only God can make atonement for us - hence, Jesus Christ.

The Bible spells out the scapegoat scenario. Two goats are brought to the temple. Aaron [as the first one God commanded to implement it and then all priests subsequent to him] "is to cast lots for the two goats-- one lot for the LORD and the other for the scapegoat. Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the LORD and sacrifice it for a sin offering. But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the LORD to be used for making atonement by sending it into the desert as a scapegoat." After Aaron concluded

the ritual God specified, Aaron brought forward the live goat. "He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites-- all their sins-- and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert."

This seems to be a symbolic statement that God, through the ritual in the temple, has forgiven Israel fully for ALL her sins to that point in time (which were legion according to Scripture). While Scripture doesn't actually provide details as to the "why" and "what is the intent" of taking the goat out into the unknown and setting it free, it seems to be a statement that the goal and desire is that sin is to be removed, permanently, from the midst of the people, never setting foot within the midst of the people of Israel again (though of course it did). One over all point is that "something" has to be the fall guy (the fall "goat" in this instance) for our sin. Human beings have the tendency to make something or someone else responsible, even, or especially if that thing or person is innocent. I found myself asking, "What had that goat done wrong?!" [a rhetorical question obviously]

"But a scapegoat is a scapegoat, despite the tip and the fact that the Bears managed only one touchdown and failed to score 2 points on the conversion attempt. Parkey was 3 for 3 before this kick; he outscored the rest of his team, 9 to 6. Gotta blame someone." The *Touchstone* editor didn't say it but it occurred to me that Parkey had a far better game, ALONE, than the rest of the team put together. But in the world of American football, it didn't seem to matter.

As a kind of postscript point, the article noted that Parkey's team, instead of jumping on the cultural bandwagon and throwing one of their very own under the proverbial bus, rallied behind Parkey and supported him.

Now that's what sports should really be about!

The article's tag line puzzled me at first for it was abundantly clear that in the world of sports, at least in terms of the animosity and anger that was unleashed on Parkey, scapegoats were definitely still in season.

But the tag line was speaking to the kind and gracious way Parkey's teammates responded in terms of the missed field goal. In their world as a team they allowed no scapegoat-ism to rule their lives and team spirit and ruin their day or spoil their relationship with each other. Scapegoats were no longer in season in their little corner of the sports world.

I learned from the article that "The devoutly Catholic McCaskey family owns the Bears." I also learned that Cody Parkey is Christian. In a Today Show interview Parkey said, "Football is what I do; it's not who I am." Parkey rose above the vitriol, etc. God bless him! And his team!

One point in all this is that it is refreshing and heart-warming to hear the good news that the life of Jesus Christ is bearing fruit in a broken and vile world. Another point is that the life and atoning work of Jesus was intended to have such consequences and impact in our world. If we tend to be scapegoat finders, it would behoove us to give careful thought as to where, when, how, and why. If we have been made the scapegoat, may the Holy Spirit help us rise above it all,

as difficult as it surely is. Scripture tells us that "If Christ is for us, who can be against us?" Indeed.

From my heart to yours.....