

I. Advanced Organizer.

A. **Courtney Seamon's typical work day may look different than many of ours, but it's her version of a daily grind.**

1. First off: breakfast at a chic restaurant in one of New York City's trendiest neighborhoods, filled with hip, well coifed young people, like Courtney taking lots of carefully set up shots on their phones, and taking in the products offered by the event's sponsor, Bed, Bath and Beyond
2. Next up: head to a pop-up shoe store, to check out the offerings, try on styles, take more pictures, and select the shoes she'll take home in exchange for her work
3. After shoes: Courtney uses the free uber code from one of her morning events, and gets a ride to a park to meet her boyfriend on his lunch break so he can catch some beautiful pics of her where the leaves are particularly nice. On her way there, she uses her favorite photo editing app to clean up the pics she's taken so far and prep them for her insta-story. Later that afternoon she'll spend time curating all the pics and adding them to her blog and instagram story, carefully crafting posts, managing her invoices and appointments, before changing outfits to head out for her evening events where she'll see more products, take more pictures, and rub shoulders with others in her industry
4. If you haven't figured it out, Courtney is a full-time instagram influencer. Social media influencers are now an 8 billion dollar industry, where brands give away products or pay celebrities and folks like Courtney alike to share pictures and posts and videos of their products to their followers, with the hopes that they will turn around and buy whatever is featured in the influencer's feed.
5. Though this field is relatively new, and one that many of us might not have imagined as a possible career as we were growing up, **the rise of social media influencers is only the latest iteration of a pattern of human behavior that has been with us a long time.** It's a pattern that the 20th century scholar, author and Stanford professor Rene Girard understood and articulated clearly, several decades before influencers like Courtney were cultivating followings and getting paid to post on platforms like Instagram.
6. Girard understood these dynamics that fuel the influencer industry not because he was an early adopter of the internet or worked in the field of advertising or technology, but because **through the study of world literature, art, anthropology, ancient myth, and eventually world religions, Rene Girard developed a particular perspective on what has motivated human beings and their groups throughout history.** Instagram is just the latest version.

B. Why am I sharing this reflection on influencer Courtney Seamon and academic Rene Girard? I'm starting here, because **we're beginning a new series today, one that we will be continuing throughout the season of Lent**, which officially begins this year during the last week of February, and continues up to Easter Sunday on April 12.

1. **Lent is traditionally a time in the Christian calendar for intentional spiritual practice and reflection around the earthly journey of Jesus.** Inspired by Jesus' 40 days of fasting in the desert near the beginning of his ministry, it has traditionally invited the Jesus follower to enter into spiritual disciplines like fasting and prayer, and also to consider Jesus' unique journey into the human experience. Lent is a time to ponder the meaning of God becoming flesh, including God experiencing suffering and ultimately death.
2. **It's an old story.** A story many of us, whether we've been in church or not, have heard throughout our lives. And yet sometimes, old stories tend to lose their meaning in the repetition. Sometimes their meaning becomes distorted by traditions built upon them, or flawed interpretations that become accepted and ritualized. When this happens we may

find that the appropriate response is to leave the old stories behind, recognizing that they no longer are needed. Other times we find that reading the stories through a new set of lenses, through a new perspective, unlocks truths in them that we had failed to see, and brings a new relevance of those stories to our lives and to our time. In the endeavor of faith, fresh perspective can open up deeper understanding and bring new life to our connection with God.

3. I, and a number of my fellow clergy friends who are thinking and pastoring in this particular moment in time, have found the work of this somewhat obscure academic Rene Girard to be **one of those lenses that is uniquely helpful for understanding how this grand story told through our ancient texts holds deep meaning and truth for us now. Girard was concerned with the age old problem that much of literature centers around: human conflict. Why do humans fight, what do they fight over, why does their conflicts escalate to violence? These questions play out through the life of Jesus, as well.** So this work of Rene Girard is the lens I'm going to invite all of us to see these old stories through in this season, with the hope that all of us might find fresh relevance and meaning throughout Lent and beyond. I'm calling the series, "**Old stories, new lenses.**"
  4. **Girard came to develop a theory of how humans behave in relationship to one another.** It's a theory that's a bit dense with multiple linear components, so I'll be taking us step by step throughout the series, and my hope is, by the end, the whole thing will make sense.
  5. Now I have found this framework so helpful, that it's not the first time I've preached on it. I've certainly shared insights from Girard before, but it's been awhile. This content will be totally new for some of us and review for others of us, but either way, I think it's worth spending time on in this season. I recognize that even though I've been sitting with Girard's insights for a few years, they're still new to me because I have much more to learn about their implications.
  6. To be clear, I'm not saying Girard's theory on human behavior is flawless or that it's the gospel. It's just a lens to look through: you can decide if it's a helpful one for you or not. But I'm leading us through this exploration this lent because **I hope that this conversation we enter over the next couple of months will provide some helpful fresh perspective on our pursuit of faith and actually lay an important foundation for the work we have to do this year, throughout 2020, as people of faith living through a divisive time.** So with all that named, let's get started.
- II. Before we get into the first insight of Girard that we're going to look at today, I want to **give you a little more information about who this person is that we're gonna be considering over the next couple of months.**
- A. Rene Girard was born on Christmas Day, 1923, in Avignon, France. He was a student in Paris in the mid 1940s, when it was occupied by the Nazis. This reality of living through Nazi occupation would come to shape Girard's work in the future, as he had seen up close at a formative time in his life the destructive horror of human conflict. After the war ended, he immigrated to the United States and began teaching in University settings; initially French, then French literature, and eventually his literary interests broadened from there. Girard was what you might call a generalist in the humanities, someone who worked in multiple disciplines: history, anthropology, comparative literature, myth, and so on as he sought to better understand the world.

B. **Girard was not a person of faith in his early years.** He was an atheist. However, as he came to develop his theory of behavior and looked to various ancient myths and religious texts, he eventually came to Jesus-centered faith, because of the unique way the Bible and the stories it told resonated with how he was coming to understand the world. Hopefully as we unpack his theory, you'll begin to see why.

III. Today we're going to deal with just the first step in Girard's theory. **Step one is to consider the origins of human desire.**

A. Most of us think that desire is fairly innate. Maybe we think our desires were born with us. At the very least, we believe we have the agency to initiate and direct them as adults. But Girard saw something different. For him, humans came to desire things because they saw others desire them. He saw humans as fundamentally imitative creatures. According to Girard, **all human desire is mimetic desire.** ("mimetic" meaning imitative).

B. Girard didn't initially come to his insight studying psychology or theology, but through the study of literature. As he was studying and teaching novelists like Cervantes and Proust and Flaubert and Dostoevsky, he kept noticing a pattern in the characters he read.

1. Don Quijote wanted to live the life of a knight. Why? Because he read the romances of *Amadis de Gaule* and he wanted to emulate them. Madame Bovary is the story of a woman who becomes enraptured in another kind of life because of the romance novels she reads.

C. **Desire was not direct, it was triangular.** (Image.) The subject, the object and the model. This happens unconsciously, especially with people close to us in our lives. We use them as models, or mediators. And we absorb their desires as our own. This is why companies are interested in paying billions of dollars to Instagram influencers. Because they believe that seeing these "influencers" celebrate their products will make others desire them too.

1. Psychology has verified Girard's insight. Our minds are wired for imitation. And this, in and of itself is not a bad thing. It's actually what socializes us and causes us to experience empathy.
2. Mirror neurons are subset of your brains neurons that fire when something happens to someone else. When someone raises their hands in the air, a part of your brain does the same thing, it's an override system to keep you from actually doing it, but in your brain a signal to raise your hands is activated. When you see someone experience something painful or joyful, your mind registers it as your own.
3. So in the same way we imitate behavior and we resonate with one another's emotions, Girard believed we generally unconsciously, imitate one another's desires.

D. Looking at literature and ancient myths, Girard saw the pattern again and again, but it always seemed hidden to the people in those stories. The characters and the audience didn't seem to recognize what was happening; they didn't understand why the characters were motivated. And then Girard found a foundational myth that seemed to reveal a pattern that was so often hidden in a unique way: the foundational story of human interaction in the Bible - the story of Adam and Eve. Let's take a fresh look at this story and see if we can understand something new about it, looking with Girard's lens.

IV. Fall Story, Genesis 3:1-13

**Now the serpent was shrewder than any of the wild animals that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Is it really true that God said, 'You must not eat from any tree of the orchard'?" 2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit from the trees of the orchard; 3 but concerning the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the orchard God said, 'You must not eat from it, and you must not touch it, or else you will die.'" 4 The serpent said to the woman, "Surely you will not die, 5 for God knows that when you eat**

***from it your eyes will open and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”***

***6 When the woman saw that the tree produced fruit that was good for food, was attractive to the eye, and was desirable for making one wise, she took some of its fruit and ate it. She also gave some of it to her husband who was with her, and he ate it. 7 Then the eyes of both of them opened, and they knew they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.***

***8 Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the orchard at the breezy time of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the orchard. 9 But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, “Where are you?” 10 The man replied, “I heard you moving about in the orchard, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid.” 11 And the Lord God said, “Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” 12 The man said, “The woman whom you gave me, she gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it.” 13 So the Lord God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” And the woman replied, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.”....***

- A. So Girard didn't come to this story asking if it was scientifically accurate or historically true. That wasn't his concern, and so it's not ours today. For him, this is a kind of classic mythic origin story (like many ancient mythic stories). There are fantastical elements in myths like talking animals. There are humans who are archetypes. But in this Genesis story, Girard saw something unique, compared to foundational myths of other cultures. The story makes clear that the desire for the forbidden fruit that both of the garden dwellers experience is not an innate desire. Adam and Eve had just been reveling in each other. The man had just looked at the first woman and said “this is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh” and celebrated her. And then something shifts. The serpent comes on the scene and draws the attention of the woman to something else.
- B. Eve gets her desire from the serpent. He's the one that first shows the desire for the fruit. He asks her a question which is not factually true, and she corrects him. But even though she was able to mentally engage and not fall into his little trap, she still was changed by him. Because she saw in the snake the desire for the fruit. ***She saw in him the desire to become like God, and that desire became her own.*** Suddenly, she looked at the tree in a different way, “When the woman saw that the tree produced fruit that was good for food, was attractive to the eye, and was desirable for making one wise, she took some of its fruit and ate it.”
- C. It doesn't stop there. The man sees the desire of the woman, and the next thing you know he's eating it. And when they are caught, and God comes on the scene, the triangulation is fully revealed. Adam points to Eve for planting the desire. Eve points to the serpent. Their deflection of blame points to the reality of what has taken place. The mimetic desire of Adam and Eve has taken over and led to their first tragic consequence: expulsion from the garden for disobeying the creator and trying to become like God.
  - 1. Mimetic desire in and of itself is not harmful. It is how we are wired, and part of what connects us powerfully with one another. But mimetic desire can be dangerous in a couple of ways. The first is what is illustrated in the Genesis 3 story: ***Mimetic desire is harmful when it leads us to imitate the desire for something destructive.***
  - 2. If the serpent was simply planting a desire for some other kind of fruit, there might not have been a problem. ***The problem was that Eve and Adam came to desire something***

**that would ultimately harm them:** they came to desire the power of the Divine, which meant they could no longer peacefully live as humans in intimate connection with God because they were trying to escape their humanity and become God. It was a destructive desire.

3. There is a reason addicts or alcoholics in recovery are sometimes told to cut off relationship, to separate themselves from their other friends who use or drink. Because **the recovery community understands the power of influence over destructive desire** that leads to destructive behavior.
- D. **I've been thinking about how as a parent I've seen mimetic desire play out with my kids.** The reality is, whether you like it or not, when you're a parent and your children are young, you are their primary human model. They are imitating you not just in how they talk or how they walk, but how they relate, and what they value. When I think about it that way, it shouldn't be a surprise that Jason and I have raised three kids who all to some degree like music, and other performing arts, like technology, and like cooking, and all of them could care less about sports. We may have had something to do with that. They've seen us care about those things and so they have taken on that concern.
1. But as they age, particularly as my eldest has now become a teenager, I see the modeling shifting. Jason and I are no longer the ones who fuel mimetic desire in Elliott. He's much more interested in what his friends are into than what I am. He's starting to express interests and cultivate concerns based on what they are doing, not us. Those friends, or other adults he likes, or you tubers he watches: they are the new model. **And so I find myself a parenting cliche in some ways: caring about what kind of crowd my kid is landing in.** Is he connecting with folks who have desires that I feel good about: maybe desires to do well in school, or to express themselves creatively, or to be kind people to one another, or might he be influenced by desires that could be more destructive. My job as a parent is shifting from serving as the model, to helping my kids figure out what models are helpful or harmful for them to emulate as they grow.
- E. **Some of you have heard of Peter Thiel**, one of the original founders of Paypal, who then turned his wealth from that business into the work of venture capital investing, and is one of the most powerful venture capitalists in Silicon Valley. What you might not know is that Peter had studied with Rene Girard at Stanford, and was profoundly influenced by his work. So when he was given the opportunity to invest in a startup platform built by some Harvard undergrads that connects people with one another and lets those people share things between them, he immediately understood the power of the idea in a way that the founders themselves may not have appreciated. He knew that Facebook would be explosive and expansive because he believed what Girard did: that mimetic desire is a powerful force in the human mind. No doubt Peter Thiel also thought that if you could find a way to capitalize on that: well, you'd probably do well for yourself.

- V. **Humans desire because they see other humans desire. And sometimes that imitative desire leads us to want things that are ultimately harmful to us.** But for Girard, the imitation of destructive desire is not the only dangerous outcome that Genesis reveals about this phenomenon. The first marriage, marked essentially by the consequences of mimetic desire, gives birth to the first children who inherit this same human tendency, and that leads to another harmful consequence of mimetic desire. Look with me at the next chapter, where the focus turns to Adam and Eve's two sons, Cain and Abel.

- A. **3 At the designated time Cain brought some of the fruit of the ground for an offering to the Lord. 4 But Abel brought some of the firstborn of his flock—even the fattest of them. And the Lord was pleased with Abel and his offering, 5 but with Cain and his**

***offering he was not pleased. So Cain became very angry, and his expression was downcast.***

***6 Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry, and why is your expression downcast? 7 Is it not true that if you do what is right, you will be fine? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at the door. It desires to dominate you, but you must subdue it.”***

***8 Cain said to his brother Abel, “Let’s go out to the field.” While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.***

***9 Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” And he replied, “I don’t know! Am I my brother’s guardian?” 10 But the Lord said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! 11 So now you are banished from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.”***

- B. Once again, just verses after Adam and Eve, mimetic desire takes hold in their children's story, and there are devastating consequences. If Adam and Eve reveal the way mimetic desire can lead to destructive desire, Cain and Abel show what Girard finds to be another often inevitable consequence: **Mimetic desire becomes toxic when it leads to envy and rivalry.**
- C. Girard believed this was the cause of much of human conflict. It isn't that humans are too different and want different things. It's that they are too similar and want the same things. And when there is a perceived scarcity of that thing that multiple humans want, envy and rivalry take hold, escalate, and often lead to violence.
- D. In the story, Cain becomes envious because his brother has God's favor, something that it is not clear he cared about until he saw his brother go above and beyond, bringing the very best he had so as to honor the Divine. **When that effort earns special praise from God, jealousy and envy flare up in Cain.** God recognizes this dangerous mimetic power whispering to him in the same way a serpent has whispered to his mother. The Divine tries to warn him, "Sin is crouching at the door, desiring to dominate you. You must subdue it." You must let go if this rivalry. It's not good for you. Its not a healthy way of relating. It's going to conquer you if you don't get it under control.
- E. But **Cain ignores the warning.** Instead of trying to turn from his rivalrous desire, instead of acknowledging it and allowing it to become productive, maybe helping him grow in his own worship of the Divine, he instead becomes focused on tearing down his rival. Victory for Cain is not subduing his own ego, it's subduing his brother. And because of that, we find the first death in the Bible: a murder.
- F. So in two chapters of Genesis, we have seen remarkable movement: human beings created and living in perfect harmony with one another and with God until mimetic desire lures them into destructive behavior that cuts off that intimate existence. Then we see the first human beings bringing life, as Eve gives birth to the first infants, only to have them verses later become envious and rivalrous with another in a way which shows that these same humans who can bring forth life, can just as easily end it in violence. For Rene Girard, this is the lens to read these old stories through: **stories that warn us of the power of our innate capacity to mimic one another's desires, and allow those desires to control us to devastating ends.**

VI. But there's one last insight from Girard on these founding myths that is the seed of hope - a hope that I'll leave you with today and we will explore more deeply in the weeks to come. And the hope from these early stories is this: **God hears the cry of the victim who is brought down by mimetic rivalry and stands with the one who has been oppressed.**

- A. Girard noticed that the ancient Hebrew people were not the only ones to tell founding stories about brothers who fought to the death. Perhaps the most notable comparison is the story in Ancient Rome of Romulus and Remus.
- B. In this story, we meet Romulus and Remus, twin brothers descended from a woman who mated with the God Mars. As young men they have a grand dispute about where to build the great city they intend to create. They try to settle in a contest to see who the gods approve of more. When it looks like Remus has won more approval from the gods, his brother Romulus is enraged and kills him, claiming victory and establishing the great city named after him, the city of Rome. As the story was told in Roman culture, Romulus was celebrated as a powerful victor. He's the founder of Rome. There is little concern shown for the brother who was killed, other than the part he played as the obstacle to the hero Romulus.
- C. But Girard read this Roman story and others like it alongside the story in the Bible and noticed a powerful difference. Cain is not celebrated in Genesis. He is not made the conquering hero. He is banished. God takes the side of the unjustly killed. God hears the cry of the victim. This is the seed of hope. That even if there is some truth in the idea that our nature gives us a propensity for violence, we are connecting with a God who is not blind to oppression. And that God wants more for us. In the same way that God invited Cain to resist his powerful rivalrous desire, in the same way that God invited Adam and Eve not to live longing for things that would ultimately undo them, we too have invitations into a different way of being. Invitations that will become all more clear as we look at the stories centering on the life of Jesus.

VII. So as we end, what insights can we take with us in the coming weeks from this introduction to Girard, particularly as Lent officially begins on Ash Wednesday? I'm going to end by giving us a couple of suggestions of what the divine might be inviting us into in the weeks to come.

- A. First Invitation: **Take an influence inventory.** Let's try to become more aware of what is happening. Spend some time considering what some of the main drivers of desire might be in your life. Do you find yourself clicking through ads that pop up in your Facebook feed? Are there certain times of day or night you're more prone to that kind of influence? Are there certain people that you spend time around that trigger more feelings of envy and rivalry within you? What would it mean for you to become more aware of those dynamics? What might be some alternative responses you could engage in if you sensed mimetic desire was tempting into something harmful?
- B. Second Invitation: **Consider a fast this Lent that helps you release toxic mimetic desire.**
  1. There's an ancient practice of fasting in the season of Lent. This can mean fasting from certain foods, giving up meat, or alcohol or sweets during the six weeks between Ash Wednesday to Easter. (Under tradition, lenten fasts can be broken each week on Sundays, so the time frame is six weeks, not counting Sundays between Ash Wednesday and Easter).
  2. So if you like to fast from one of those things each year, and that is meaningful and helpful, do that. Perhaps as you do, you allow your recognition that you'd really like a glass of wine right now to consider why that is, where that desire is coming from, and invite God to connect with you in the places you feel like your struggling with that desire.
  3. But you could also consider taking a six week break from social media, from Instagram, from Twitter, from some podcast, whatever it is that might be a place where mimetic desire

- is really activated. Even if the desires aren't bad, sometimes it can be helpful just to have a break so we can check in more with our own selves and spirits and our connection with God, rather than constantly be triggered by external forces.
4. Now please remember: we are not a very prescriptive, religious bunch. This is not something you need to be guilted into. Only take on a fast if you would find it helpful for the season for disconnecting from some things so that you can connect more with the divine. It's an invitation that I extend to engage if it's helpful.
  - C. As we end, I encourage you to remember: All of us are human. We are profoundly relational. Yes, we have the capacity for destruction, but we also have the capacity for new life. We have the capacity to learn from one another, to empathize with one another. To build each other up. We have the capacity to emulate the best in one another. To allow each other to spur us on to beauty and truth and love. **Our hope is in the truth that community doesn't need to be marked by conflict.** It can also be marked by profound connection and care. And maybe as we live into embodying that we find communion not only with one another, but also with the God who lives with and in each of us. Amen.

- Silent prayer exercise.

**Questions for Reflection and Conversation:**

1. What do you think about Girard's take on desire? Do you believe desire is "mimetic"? How have you seen that to be true or not true in your own life?
2. What did you think of these perspectives on Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel? Were they interesting to you? Helpful? Troubling?
3. What are some ways you might explore resisting toxic mimetic desire this Lenten season?