For the last few weeks, a story has pretty much dominated the news. The story is the death of a 22 year old woman named Gabby Petito. Gabby disappeared sometime in late August, and her boyfriend Brian Laundrie had returned home alone. Videos surfaced of a domestic dispute that they had while on the trip, along with many other videos of their journey. Then Brian Laundrie disappeared, supposedly into a large swampy area around his parents home in Florida. And reporters and the media have been camped out at these parents home ever since, questioning especially the father who has refused to make a comment. Last week the big news was that the father came out of his house and mowed the lawn.

Here’s my question to you this morning. Why is this national news? Why has this particular missing persons case attracted so much attention? There are thousands of missing person cases currently happening the United States, and some that are probably much worse than this. And certainly there is much more going on in the country that has a much greater impact on our lives than this story. To me, it’s weird. Why this case? Why do these people an

d this family in particular become a kind of target for the media and our attention and focus?

Here’s another big story that happened this week. It’s the story of the Jon Gruden, the football coach of the Las Vegas Raiders. It seems that emails began to surface that go back 20 years, that include some very insulting, racist, homophobic, and misogynist remarks regarding certain people. I spent some time trying to determine what he actually wrote in these emails. I’ve heard much, much, worse constantly throughout my life, insults and racist remarks of the most personal kind are extremely common place among us. His manner is exactly the same as hundreds of people I’ve come across, and over my lifetime I’ve made many of those kinds of locker room comments in the locker rooms of my youth. So it’s the same question. With millions of people running around just like him, why does he become such a target for special punishment? As if he is some special form of really messed up person? What’s that about?

Well, what this is about is something that all groups of people do. The group might be a family, a church, a business, or a community, or a country. And this family or church, or business, or community, or country has a lot problems, and frustrations, and pain, and anger. And it’s a lot like I think we all get walking across the yard carrying a really heavy load. Eventually you’re have to drop it. Release the stress. Let the anger out. And that is going to land somewhere. The heavy emotional load will land on someone. It’s a law of physics and its called scapegoating. Frustrated people have to put their frustrations on someone. Somebody will take it. And so groups or individual people who can’t deal with their own pain and frustration find a scapegoat. Somebody to dump it on. This is inevitable and unstoppable.

This has been going on since of dawn of time. This is the basis of the sacrificial system of many ancient cultures. I’ve read and heard about certain cultures in South America that practiced human sacrifice. Built big high pillars on which to offer a sacrifice. Sometimes it was a child, or a beautiful woman. And it was understood that these people who were sacrificed were bearing the pain and problems of the entire community. They understood that the community needed a scapegoat. Someone to blame.

Its no different today for us. We just have a different way of doing it. There’s some kid in the family who is the problem child. If we just didn’t have this kid, we’d be better off. We joke about it. I was the black sheep of the family. The one the family blames for all our problems. Church often have that person. Well, if this person wasn’t here, we would all be better off. Sometimes it’s the pastor, not always. But it’s inevitable. A community or a county that doesn’t want to face it’s own problems will eventually find someone to bear them. And like all sacrificial systems it happens over and over and over and over again. Recently it’s been Brian Laundries Father. Last week it was Jon Gruden. And it will keep happening. Something goes really wrong at work. Somebody is going to have to take the fall. This is a huge part of our daily living. The need for a scapegoat. Some person who gets dumped on. Who takes the blame. Maybe it’s happened to you. Maybe you’ve done it yourself.

The flip side of this group reality, is the need for a superstar. If we need to find someone to blame for our problems and failures, we also need to find people who will carry our desires to look good and be successful. And so along with the continual one after the other scapegoating, we will also have a continual line, on after the other, of people that we lift up as superstars. One after the other, the superstar athlete, the superstar singer captures our attention. We have television programs dedicated to finding the next superstar, we have such a need for people who will carry our desires for achievement, winning and success. Many children carry their parents desire to look good and be successful, I know I struggled with that as a kid. And as a parent I found it very easy to lay on my children, my desire to look good. It’s the same thing as scapegoating and very often, the superstars end up as scapegoats.

I see this all the time with Scott Frost and the Husker Football team. The Golden Boy who carries this desire of the whole state to be winners and also, it’s frustration with losing. So when they win, he’s a hero, the golden boy, and when they lose he’s the scapegoat. Fire the guy. Who’s that kicker….Culp. Perfect example. Last year the hero, this year the goat. The community lays all their own frustrations and desires on one person. I was reading some Facebook comments yesterday about the loss to Minnesota. And one person wrote, “Well, If you get tired of losing, there is always the Husker Volleyball Team that’s playing tonight. Can you see how that’s using these athletic programs to take care of your needs?

Well, if you understand this scapegoat/hero thing, then you have a good handle on our Gospel lesson for today. James and John come to Jesus with a request. It’s interest request. Teacher, we want you to do whatever we ask.” You just can’t believe it. But it happens. This is the scapegoating process. I’ve said this before, but it’s a powerful memory. I remember my mom coming to me once and saying, “Mark, it’s not that hard. All you have to do is do whatever we ask”. And this is really common for people to do with God. Lord, just help me get where I want to go. Well, where is that? It’s not long in coming. Let us be on your left and right in your glory. What do they want Jesus to do? It’s no different than two fans coming up to the coach and saying, “Do what we want you to do”. What’s that says the coach. Answer? Win. Fans tend to do that. And we want to be on your left and right at your news conference after you win a National Championship. It’s just using the football team to meet your needs to be winner. To look good. That’s exactly what James and John are looking for.

But they completely misunderstand, and so Jesus tells them that they don’t know what they’re asking. Because Jesus glory won’t be a victory stand will it? It won’t be winning record. Mark says exactly why Jesus came and what Jesus wanted to see happen in the opening pages of his Gospel. He came so that we might repent and believe the Good News. Which is just the opposite of scapegoating isn’t it? Scapegoating is laying the blame on someone else. But when you repent you do just the opposite. The problem is with me. It’s in me, and my group. I’m going to stop the blame game. And instead of expecting the Huskers to fix me, I’ll work on myself. That’s the beginning of salvation. That’s the outcome of forgiveness and Grace. I can own my part in whatever problems there are. And won my part in getting myself to a better place. That’s how you starting getting healthy. That’s how you connect to God. And other people. And find love.

But of course, in the Gospel story, the people didn’t want this at all. They continued looking to superstars to make them feel good, or scapegoats to blame. So Jesus became what instead? The scapegoat. The one who had to bear the sins of the world because his people would not own them. Jesus became the one person that everyone could blame, point their fingers and say, “He’s the problem. Jesus became the problem child, the immigrant, the alcoholic, the poor people, the prisoners. Big business or whoever we want to blame, he became. And on the cross he bore the agony of what it means to be scapegoated. You know that person that everyone says, “If only you weren’t around, I’d be happy.

But the message stays the same. Repent and be healed. Let me help you with your problems God says, don’t pass them on to someone else. And you will learn what it means to live. This is the way and truth and the life. It’s the way of the cross. God came to bring life abundantly. We have an abundance of problems don’t we? And so in Christ we should be able to experience an abundant life of encountering God’s Spirit. Because there’s a lot to work on. Amen.