

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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May 12, 2019  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
John 10:22-30

### Loving Those of Other Faiths

A priest, a minister, and a rabbi were standing on the sidewalk talking about the problems of the world. It was shortly after Easter, and the rabbi thought it was a good time to make a point. "You two need to do more to help your flocks understand the anti-Judaism in your scriptures," he said. The priest and the minister tried to deflect the criticism, sputtering about the limitations of 15 minutes on a Sunday morning when people are thinking about other things. "We try," was our feeble defense.

And then, that weekend, there was another hate-motivated shooting at a synagogue.

And then I read the gospel lesson of today's lectionary.

The priest, the minister, and the rabbi are not a joke in our community. We talk frankly with one another. We laugh together at the foibles of our own traditions. But in this case, **this** minister feels convicted by the rabbi's challenge. The New Testament has much in it that sounds like anti-Judaism, and which has been used as a foundation for anti-Semitism. Skirting around those prickly parts of our beloved Bible just will not do in today's world where anti-Semitism is on the rise from the right, from the left, and from Islamist extremists. In the U.S., both political parties accuse the other of anti-Semitism. Historians and analysts observe that the anxiety caused by global political and economic instability looks for a scapegoat, and just as in centuries past, Jews are being targeted. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/04/world/europe/antisemitism-europe-united-states.html>)

That makes me very uncomfortable, as I am sure it does you, too. No one in this room wants to be an anti-Semite, a bigot based on religious and cultural identity. We hear Jesus' commandment to love our neighbors, and we seek to live in obedience to that commandment.

So today I want to talk about one aspect of this conundrum: how we deal with the language and the stories in the Gospel of John depicting conflict between Jesus and "the Jews." Because we cannot ignore 2000 years of animosity, the family quarrel which began so long ago. Loving our neighbors means loving people of other faiths. It is Christ's command.

Seventy times, the Gospel of John refers to "the Jews," often in a pejorative sense. Who were these antagonists of Jesus and his movement? Let's be clear--the term could not possibly mean ALL the Jewish people of the first century. After all, Jesus himself was a Jew, and so were all his inner circle. Mary and Joseph, Peter, James, John, Mary Magdalene, nearly all the people Jesus interacted with were Jews. It appears that when John speaks of "the Jews" or "some Jews," he is talking about a group who held a certain sort of power, power which was threatened by Jesus' prophetic critique. Scholar Raymond Brown concludes that "the Jews" in the Gospel of John means "the religious authorities, particularly those in Jerusalem, who were hostile to Jesus." (1966, *The Gospel According to John I – XII*, Doubleday & Co., Garden City, NY, p. LXXI) Yet all we hear are two simple English words, "the Jews."

Add to this the historical reality that John's gospel was written in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century, perhaps 60 years after the events it describes. Scholars disagree on exactly who was in the community in which this gospel was written. But they agree that the split between Judaism and Christianity did not happen the

day Jesus' followers claimed his resurrection. It took decades. So by the end of the first century, the sect of Judaism which claimed Jesus to be Messiah and Lord, the Christians, was now separate from Judaism. There was bitterness in the division. There is evidence that the Christ-followers were kicked out of the synagogue. Surely this influenced the way they told the story of how they came to their new identity as Christians. Much of the rhetoric of John's Gospel regarding the Jews is polemic, a contentious verbal attack on the opponent. The opponent in this case is the Jewish community of their day, perhaps the year 90, a community which itself was feeling beleaguered and becoming more religiously orthodox in order to survive.

Unfortunately, the verbal attacks continued in the centuries which followed, during which the Christians' place in society changed. They started out as a minority with little power; they became the majority, with much power. From the church fathers to Roman Catholic prayers until Vatican II, from Martin Luther to Oberammergau, Christian teachings equated the conflict between Jesus and the Temple authorities with his crucifixion. They blamed all Jews, despite the fact that crucifixion was the Roman Empire's means of capital punishment, and sowed the seeds of anti-Semitism. It's not a pretty history, but it's ours.

We read today's scripture through the lens of this history. And because we accept it as holy scripture, unique and authoritative and God's Word to us, we cannot ignore it or reject it because of what has happened since it was written. At the same time, we must deal with what has happened, and set a better course for the future. For we are still commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves.

At the heart of today's scripture is the heart of the doctrinal dispute which divides Christians and Jews—who is Jesus, and what is his relationship to God? The controversy is nestled in a story, a story about an argument between Jesus and his skeptical opponents, whom John calls "the Jews." "Tell us plainly," they challenge. "Are you the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One of God?"

There has already been some name-calling between the two sides. Read the story, looking back to chapter 8 of the gospel. Jesus called them "children of the devil;" they responded by calling him "a Samaritan" and "possessed of a demon." Jesus insinuated that they were "thieves" and "robbers;" they called him "out of his mind." Now they ask him if by calling himself the Good Shepherd he is calling himself God. And Jesus counters with characteristic rhetorical skill—I've told you who I am in my words and in my actions.

We are here in this room because Jesus' words and actions evoke our faith, our belief and trust that he is one with God. We hear how he healed those who were blind and restored the ability to walk to the lame, and our hearts are moved. We ponder his message in the Sermon on the Mount--blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied—and we know this is a message from One far greater than ourselves. We look at his innocent suffering on the cross, and contemplate the glory of his resurrection, and we take that great leap of faith that he truly is who generations have said he is, the son of God, the icon of God, the way of God, the truth of God, the life of God. We are here because we believe, or maybe because we want to give belief in Jesus Christ a chance. We're here because he calls our name and we want to belong to him.

But might it be possible that Christ's mission to form a new community did not depend on the destruction of the existing community? The violent response of his opponents was wrong. They wanted to stone him for blasphemy, making himself God. Yet our history's violent reaction to the continuing presence of Jews who do not call Jesus "Messiah" is also wrong. Could it be that the message of this scripture for today is to seek to transcend rivalry between religions and learn to love beyond differences? After all, haven't we learned that religious wars and religious persecution, religious violence and religious hatred are evil, and that stoning and crucifying are wrong? Couldn't we end the name-calling and competition, and let our peaceful words and actions testify to the God we worship?

Indeed, unlike the opponents of Jesus in his day, we see God in Jesus Christ. His good works show us who God is, and like the blind man, God has opened our eyes to see Jesus as the light of the world. That is my faith, to which I have devoted my life, and I would wish that faith for everyone—but I know that my friends who follow other spiritual ways find truth and goodness and light along their paths, which I believe to be God's gift to them. Who am I to know all the secrets of the universe, or to limit the ways God might act in the world? We share so much in common with our Jewish brothers and sisters, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles and cousins in faith. Shall we let the question of who Jesus is destroy our love for one another? Or shall we let our love for Jesus overcome our disagreements so that we might display God's love for the world and for all God's children?

I choose the latter. All the interfaith work and relationships I've been pulled into over the last 10-15 years have challenged me to put my Christian discipleship into action, to encounter the world and its diversity and its need with Christian love. We don't have to be "right" to be true to our Lord and Savior. We just have to seek love.

There are inter-faith and cross-faith and no-faith relationships out there waiting for all of us. May we enter into them with humility and faith, so that we might show the world that our God is love.