

REMEMBERING JESUS, THE JEWS, AND THOSE WHO KILLED THEM

A Sermon Delivered by
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Several years ago I was invited to participate in a forum at American University hosted by a Gay student alliance and was expected to speak from a religious point of view with regard to the issue of sexual orientation. My opening remark to the forum gathered there was this: ***If you have a holy book, you have a problem.***

That statement was aimed at not only Christians but any religious person of any religion who uses a holy book to prescribe a way of life and beliefs. It is a statement that speaks not only to those of minority sexual orientations and their having to live in fear for their lives and their livelihoods but it speaks to any individual and every group that has ever been the object of religious scorn and hatred. Whether the issue is the religious endorsement of slavery, sexism, racism or war, there is likely not a person here this morning who has not had some direct experience with this kind of religious oppression. So what exactly is the problem we have if we have a holy book? Simply this: holy truths are entwined with social-cultural-historically conditioned ideas. To cite a simple and uncontroversial example, think about your 21st view of the cosmos. You woke up this morning and turned on a light switch that was connected to an electric network in your home which was connected to a power line that was connected to a substation that was connected to an electric grid that was connected to electric generators of some sort, most likely coal. You pushed a switch with the touch of your finger but in so doing you participated in an entire worldview about how the world operates. That scientific worldview extends into other areas of your life, of course, like medicine. If you awakened at 3 am with a terrible toothache the likelihood of your having phoned in an exorcist is remote. You made an appointment with a dentist is my guess. So let me say again what the problem is: ***holy truths are entwined with social-cultural-historically conditioned ideas.***

We who have a holy book have two elementary choices we can make with regard to this problem. We can either defend every word and idea in the holy book or, we can critically engage the holy book. Again, this problem and these choices are not confined to Christianity but this is a universal problem for any religion with a holy book. If you choose to defend every word and idea in your holy book as the inerrant word of God then you will end up having to defend pre-scientific views of the cosmos and quite antiquated views of human beings such as slavery, the second class nature of women, holy war and so forth and on and on. Clearly, we have in our world at this time quite a large number of persons who are insisting on making the rest of the world or the world around them conform to seventh century and first century social and cultural notions about the world and those who inhabit it. In other words, they cannot distinguish between revealed truth and a historically conditioned idea; a sacred truth like God is Love and slavery.

So what is the solution? Which choice do we make as regards our own holy book? You can guess quite easily what choice I have made: we must critically engage the scriptures. We should not feel obligated to defend outdated ideas like a flat earth, holy war or human slavery. We critically engage which is to say, we do not just take everything in the bible as equal in weight and we do not simply take a surface view of things. Now I have said all of this today because we have been confronted with a problematic text read to us from Acts chapter three in a section that might be called the Apostle Peter's first sermon. And it just so happens that this lectionary text is read at the conclusion of a week dedicated to a remembrance of Yom Ha'Shoah, the Holocaust.

Last Wednesday morning I participated in Days of Remembrance at the Holocaust Museum where I, along with other clergy, took turns reading the names of victims. I asked to read the names of Ukrainians because in 1983, when I traveled to the Soviet Union with Baptist Peace Fellowship and met the pastor of this church at that time, Robert Troutman, I had the chance to visit Babi Yar in Ukraine. Babi Yar is a grassy ravine just outside of Kiev. There in September, 1941, the Jews of Kiev were executed. Over a period of one week some 34,000 Jews were marched into that ravine, made to lay atop the bodies of the previously executed and shot. So last Wednesday morning, I lit a candle in a niche labeled BABI YAR and then read the names of some fifty victims that included children. But here is point we need to make as we critically engage this text in Acts. There is a history of Christian

anti-Jewish abuse and annihilation and that abuse and annihilation has been defended by using our holy book. Those who hate Jews use the scriptures to excuse their hatred and violence. So when we come to a problematic text in the bible—and there are many, as I have already noted—we do so knowing that we are not the first to read this text or to use it. So one of the goals of interpreting scripture includes a critical engagement of those who have preceded us and their use of scripture. That means that even if there were a time when these words were first uttered or written and made sense their subsequent misuse and abuse render them problematic. I cannot go into the history of Christian anti-Jewish rhetoric and murder. Suffice it to say this: six million Jews cannot be murdered without the cooperation and apathy of the baptized. And that is, beloved, a very, very serious problem.

With all of this as a kind of preface, let's read the problematic text.

ACTS:

3:14 But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you,

3:15 and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses.

Quickly let me just point out that last phrase “to this we are witnesses” is a reference to God having raised Christ from the dead.” Who is the “you” in verse 14? If you recall from the entire reading this morning, in verse 12 Peter refers to those gathered as “You Israelites.” And with this sweeping statement, Peter has laid the blame for Christ's death upon all Jews. You rejected the Holy and Righteous one and you killed the Author of life. This text and others like it in the New Testament have provided the rationale and excuse for Christians down through the centuries to harass, segregate into ghettos, burn down villages and murder Jews.

Peter has done something rhetorically that people do every day. And most of you sitting in this sanctuary today have been harmed by this rhetorical gesture: he takes the actions of some and projects them onto an entire race of people. People who are oppressed are quite familiar with this kind of rhetoric wherein one bad or immoral person is held up as representative of an entire group of persons. All Muslims are... all Christians are...all Jews are...all Blacks are...all women are... I can try to understand Peter as presented in this text as someone who is still stinging from the crucifixion and horror of Christ's death but after all, Peter abandoned him and denied him three times! The statement he makes simply rings hollow at best. As well, this statement obscures the truth that many Jews believed in and followed the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, including Peter! The words placed in his mouth in this text do not take that into consideration at all. That is a terrible omission.

But Pastor, this is Peter, the first apostle! How can you judge his words? ***I do not judge the words of Christ by the words of Peter but I judge the words of Peter by the words of Christ.*** It will take this kind of critical engagement if we are to overcome the past abuses of our religion and it will take this kind of critical engagement by other religions to overcome their abuses of what is holy for wicked purposes. So one of the first things we must do with this text is deny this rhetorical strategy of blaming everyone for one or several person's complicity in the death of Jesus.

Furthermore, we must be honest and say that this text is incorrect about who killed Jesus. Had Jews killed Jesus, they would have stoned him to death. He was crucified and we know that crucifixion was capital punishment carried out by the imperial state of Rome against people it believed to be seditionists. Roman soldiers, not Jews, carried out this execution. The ruthless Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, ordered it and a clue into his wicked mind is seen when he has nailed onto the cross above Christ's head a sign that mockingly says, *King of the Jews*. But Pastor, Pilate washed his hands. Pilate washing his hands would be like Bull Connor washing his hands and blaming outside agitators for having gotten their people bitten by dogs, clubbed and jailed. There is an irony at work in the Gospel of John where that scene is depicted. Pilate crucified many Jews. Jesus was just one more for him. He then takes his bloody hands and dips them in a bowl of water as if he is made clean while blaming the Jews for what he was about to do to the Nazarene. Whether or not you can agree with my view on this, we must at least arrive at the point two thousand years later and 70 years after the Holocaust where we no longer allow Christians to use the holy name of Jesus and the holy scriptures for their anti-Jewish venom and poison.

So we remember: Romans killed Jesus. And we remember Christians made it possible and were involved in the murders of six million Jews. And by so remembering, we begin to make possible a way toward mutual respect and understanding in place of mutual destruction.

Along with the words of the Apostle Peter, let us hear today some words from the Apostle Paul. Here is what Paul asserted in his letter to the Romans in the 11th chapter:

11 I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. **2** God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

Our Savior himself said (John 4) that “salvation is from the Jews.” How then can we who claim Christ hate the Jewish people or condone stereotypes or actions that diminish them without at the same time giving up that claim, for Jesus was a Jew.

There is one last issue I want to clear up and address this morning. Sometimes Jews will accuse Christians of having rejected Judaism. And there are Christians who likewise believe this. They are wrong. In early church history around 144 AD, there was a teacher in Rome by the name of Marcion. His father was a bishop from Synope in Asia Minor. Marcion began to teach that the God of the Jews was not the God of Jesus Christ; he asserted that the scriptures of what we call the Old Testament were not holy; he accepted in fact only several Pauline epistles as his bible. He rejected Judaism entirely. So very early on, the Church had the opportunity to reject the Jews and Judaism. It did not. It rejected Marcion and accepted into its canon of scriptures the Jewish scriptures. The New Testament quotes the Psalms more than any other book. And the Church rejected the idea that the God revealed in Torah was not the God revealed in Christ. Beloved, let us be done with Christian anti-Jewish hatreds. Let us be honest about our checkered history when it comes to how Christians have mistreated the Jews. And let us state correctly who did the killing, both of Jesus and the Jews.

This coming Tuesday evening, I have been invited by my dear friend, Rabbi Zemel's daughter, Shira, to speak to her ninth grade religious studies class on the topic of why I am a Christian. As many of you know, Temple Micah used to be here in South West, sharing space with St. Augustine's Episcopal Church. They are now on Wisconsin Avenue but though they have moved, Rabbi Zemel and I have remained steadfast friends. With humility I will go there and bring greetings from our congregation. By the way, several years ago, we had a Christian-Jewish dialogue with congregants from both our congregations so dialogue is not new for us. One of the things I will share with them is this.

When my children were born, four years apart, at their birth, their mother and I had decided the first words we wished them to hear would be the Shema Israel. This is the foundational theological statement found in Deuteronomy [6]. So I bent over my babies, just arrived in the world catching their breath and whispered to them in their precious little ears: *Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad.*

Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.

Amen.+