

Charles R. Blaisdell, Sr. Pastor
First Christian Church
Colorado Springs, Colorado
August 13, 2017
©2017

A Summer Mini-Series: Paul Said *That??* 1. Dancing With the One That Brung You

I am speaking the truth in Christ-I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit- I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. 4 They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; 5 to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever.... 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.... for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

More than one of you over the years has said to me after a sermon “*I had no idea whatsoever where you were going with that opening!*” That remark always makes me smile, because I hope it means that the sermon itself was at least somewhat memorable (and not just the seemingly weird or inscrutable opening). I confess: I **do** like to find off-the-wall openings or funny stories to begin with and to use as a springboard (even if it sometimes looks like it will be more like a trampoline) for exploring the meaning of a topic and Biblical text. Or sometimes I will tell a story on myself or one of our children – although with one daughter who is now a minister, Barbara and I have both been startled at the seeming karma of now being on the receiving end of stories in her sermons about us!

But today I can’t start with a funny or odd story. Today’s topic is one that simply doesn’t and shouldn’t lend itself to any sort of joking. More than one person has said that the “original sin” of the Christian faith is the anti-Judaism that has too often and too repeatedly colored our history, which has appeared in too many forms and too many places – even to repeated instances of genocide in the supposed name of Christ – and which is still as current as the synagogue here in Colorado Springs that last week found itself vandalized with swastikas and “Sieg Heils.” Imagine, if you can, what it would be

like to drive up to our church building and find it spray-painted with symbols of evil, symbols that call up two millennia's worth of pogroms and persecutions, mayhem and murders. It's hard to imagine, though, isn't it, in part because American Christianity has never been persecuted, despite the shrill pronouncements of some pundits who are embarrassingly and shamefully unaware of what actual persecution looks like.

But for our Jewish brothers and sisters it is oh-so-**easy** to imagine because they have lived it, they have experienced it; they and their friends and relatives and ancestors have been the victims of actual, real, and violent persecution going back two thousand years and down to this day. In just the first two months of this year, sixty-nine bomb threats were received by Jewish Community Centers around the country¹; by the end of April that number was one-hundred-sixty-one.² Here in Colorado Springs, along with last week's incident, there is a disturbing trend as well: In May, swastika stickers were festooned all over local stop signs; last month a man was arrested for placing a sticker on a synagogue that said "Fight Terror, Nuke Israel."³

And of course, this weekend in Charlottesville, we have watched in horror as a vicious, hate-filled mob of thugs have hijacked the name "Christian" for their poisonous and vile words and actions. We have watched as they have spewed and spat their evil awfulness and made it murderously clear that some of the folks that God has made – black folks and gay folks and Jewish folks – are in their view less than human. We have watched and we have rightly wondered about the racism and homophobia and anti-Judaism that yet lurk in our own souls and we know we are called to vow to work even harder to eliminate such things from our own life and our own faith.

¹<http://www.nationalreview.com/article/445170/anti-semitic-incidents-united-states-hate-crimes-religion-donald-trump-alt-right-gaza-war>

²<https://thinkprogress.org/report-anti-semitic-spike-this-year-bdf97cbe762/>

³<https://www.csindy.com/TheWire/archives/2017/08/07/recent-hate-crimes-lead-to-love-lives-here-rally>

How did we get to such a state? How, over two thousand years, have perhaps otherwise thoughtful and good Christians, been so blind to the anti-Jewish presumptions that infected them, that caused them to laugh at vicious jokes, that caused them to turn a blind eye to the desecration of holy places, that caused them to shrug when dying Jewish women and children refugees were turned away from the United States and were consigned instead to Dachau and Auschwitz. Well, some folks blame it on Paul – but what I want to say to you this morning is that that blame is misplaced. But to do so, we need to examine a bit more closely the roots and causes of this original sin that too many Christians have wittingly or unwittingly borne.

There are those who point to the Gospel of John as justification for bigotry against Jews. Now, the gospel of John is a beautiful, troubling, complex book. It's beautiful because it has some of the most beloved passages and comforting passages in it: *"In my Father's house there are many mansions."* *"Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God and also believe in Me."* *"Peace I give to you, not as the world gives."* Such verses, enmeshed in John's beautiful telling of the story of Jesus, a story that is so much more lyrical and meditative in quality than any of the other three gospels, are ones that believers have clung to and been inspired by for 1900 years. But it's also a troubling book: John, for example explicitly blames "the Jews" for the crucifixion – even though it was Imperial Rome alone who had the power of capital punishment by crucifixion. John goes so far to say that "the Jews" are in the league with the devil and lie whenever they speak. The very phrase "the Jews" becomes in John's gospel a slur and an insult. John also uses the term "Pharisees" as a slur word despite the fact that we know that in Jesus' time the Pharisees were actually closest in their teachings to Jesus' and that in John's time the Pharisees had ceased to exist. How do we understand both the beauty of John's writing and its nastiness? Well, this is where it is absolutely essential not to just pick verses out of context but to try to follow

the rule for Bible study I've offered you more than once: of any Biblical verses or story, ask three questions: 1) What does it say, 2) What does it mean, 3) So what? Let's ask those questions, then, of these verses that purportedly give license to bigotry and hatred of the Jewish people.

As to the first question, what these harsh verses from John's gospel say is pretty clear. There isn't a lot of ambiguity to them. They are just as harsh in the original Greek as they are in our English translations. But the second question – "What does it mean?" – is crucial. Here is what we know. First, it is almost certain that John's gospel was written in the late '90s of the first century C.E. Why is that important? Well, it's sixty years after the death of Jesus, and thirty-five years or so after Paul wrote the words which are our scripture for the morning. In other words, Paul was much closer to the time of Jesus and much more reflective of the early years of the Church as it grew to the edges of the Roman Empire. And, in general – with some local exceptions from time to time – the Roman authorities didn't distinguish between Jews and Christians and weren't systematically persecuting either group. But by the time John writes his Gospel, things have changed radically. Rome has destroyed Jerusalem and sent the Jewish people into exile. The Jerusalem Temple is therefore no more and Judaism had to go about the task of re-inventing itself with the focus now on the local synagogues and not the Temple. Rome is less and less tolerant of the Jewish people and less and less inclined to continue to give them the special privileges that they alone had been accorded among all the people Rome had conquered.

And perhaps most importantly for our purposes, in such a horrible time of crisis and stress, both the best and the worst of people comes out. We know that's true from our own lives and it was equally true of our Jewish forebears in those sad and scary final two decades of the first century. We also know that in times of stress, people say things that they don't really mean. They exaggerate. They sometimes reserve their

nastiest remarks for the people they love the most. In other words, family feuds are sometimes, sadly, the most vicious and the most nasty. ***And that is what is happening here in the gospel of John.*** In many cases, those Jews who believed that Jesus was the Messiah are being thrown out of the synagogue, and Christian churches are increasingly wanting to exclude those who don't explicitly believe, or are not sure about, who Jesus is. As we have seen too many times in history, an obsessive desire for purity and correctness and "right" belief trump openness and a toleration for ambiguity and an attitude of welcomingness. Families got torn apart, with some remaining with the synagogue and some going with the church. And mean, mean things are said, slogans and slurs slung back and forth. Because, indeed, family fights are sometimes the most vicious, the most hurtful, and have the most long-lasting consequences.

That is what was happening in John's day and time and that is what his gospel reflects – NOT the situation of the earliest decades of the church, where Jews and Christians often more-or-less harmoniously co-existed together. So when we turn to my third Bible study question – "So what?" – we need to be sure we understand that the things that John's gospel asserts about the Jewish people are not reflective of the earliest church, not reflective of Paul's day and time, and – most importantly – not reflective of the God who loves ALL and wants justice for ALL and who sent Jesus to show the whole world what the Jewish people had always known of such grace.

Because THAT'S what Paul is saying. You can read through all the letters of Paul and he never once repudiates being a Jew. In fact, he is proud of his Jewishness. There is never any hint, much less explicit assertion, that God has somehow replaced the Jewish people with Christians in God's love and affection. No, as the verse highlighted on our bulletin cover from today's scripture says, "the gifts of God are irrevocable." Period. Do you understand what very good news that is? You see, IF it

were the case that God had replaced the Jewish people in the Divine love, had repudiated the relationship God had with them, tore up the covenant made with them – then there is nothing that could stop God from replacing us! And, what’s more, if God’s promises are not trustworthy, why should we trust in God when God might abrogate those promises whenever God might wish? THAT is not a God who is utter and only good, but a bully.

Paul puts all of that this way; hear his words again: *“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. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.... for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.”* What does that mean for you and me? Theologically it means that you and I are, to use one theologian’s phrase, “adopted Jews.” For we have been, as Paul says elsewhere, “grafted on” to the tree of Judaism. It means that we should stop taking John’s gospel’s words at face value and see them as reflecting the situation of a family fight that no doubt grieved God. It means that there is no excuse for ever using or passing along stereotypes and slurs, for these too grieve God and do us no credit when we slam and shame those whose people graciously took us in and grafted us on to them. It means that we will stop laughing at supposed jokes that demean our Jewish brothers and sisters. For every time we **don’t** do these things, we participate in a small but real way in the very history that culminated in the Holocaust and which yet lives today in those bomb threats and those graffitied synagogues.

Legendary University of Texas football coach Darrell Royal once had a starting quarterback who early in the season led the team to some surprising and unexpected victories. Later in the season, the quarterback, though, hit a slump. Reporters asked him *“Are you going to replace the quarterback?”* Royal’s laconic and ungrammatical

answer was *“Nope, we’re gonna dance with the one that brung us.”* The God of Abraham and Sarah, of Jacob and Rachel, of Miriam and Mary, is the One that “brung” the Jewish people to know of amazing grace and love unremitting and unconditional. And with the help of the Jewish people – the people of our Lord Jesus Christ – we too have now been “brung” by God into relationship with that Good News. God “brung” and continues to bring the Jewish people to the dance, and God now brings us too.

Thanks be to God, ***God now brings us too.***