

Sermon for March 7, 2021
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Text

John 2:13-22, from the Inclusive Bible translation

Since it was almost the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 In the Temple, he found people selling cattle, sheep and pigeons, while moneychangers sat at their counters. 15 Making a whip out of cords, Jesus drove them all out of the Temple—even the cattle and sheep—and overturned the tables of the money changers, scattering their coins. 16 Then he faced the pigeon sellers: “Take all this out of here! Stop turning God’s house into a market!” 17 The disciples remembered the words of scripture: “Zeal for your house consumes me.” 18 The Temple authorities intervened and said, “What sign can you show us to justify what you’ve done?” 19 Jesus answered, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” 20 They retorted, “It has taken forty-six years to build this Temple, and you’re going to raise it up in three days?” 21 But the temple he was speaking of was his body. 22 It was only after Jesus had been raised from the dead that the disciples remembered this statement and believed the scripture—and the words that Jesus had spoken.

Prayer

Sermon

Has it ever happened to you? You are going through the old family photos, telling your niece or nephew about their ancestors, and they stop you and say: who is that? I’ve never heard you mention them. And you say...that’s because I really don’t like to talk about them. It’s not a happy part of our family story.

Has it ever happened to you? You’re at a party and someone uses *that* term. And you wonder, what do I do now?

Has it ever happened to you? You are going about your business and you see a stranger out of the corner of your eye and your instinct is to fear them?

Has it ever happened to you? You open the gospel of John and read, “Then the Jews...” and it caused you to pause?

All of these things have happened to me. More than one of these things happened this week.

When you read the New Testament, particularly the gospels of Matthew and John, in most of their translations you see that kind of phrasing: “the Jews,” represented as a monolithic group, and in several places, attributed with responsibility for the persecution and arrest and death of Jesus.

So, you’ve noted by now that the translation I read today uses the term “the Temple authorities.” That, I propose, is both more correct about who is questioning Jesus when he overturns the tables, *and* later who is complicit in his arrest by the Roman government. This is a very specific set of people, not “the Jews.” And it’s important to talk about how Judaism and the entire Jewish people are portrayed in the Gospels if we are to repent of, and avoid Christian supersessionism and Christian anti-Semitism.

Christian supersessionism - the idea that Christianity replaces or is superior to Judaism - and Christian anti-Semitism are part of our Christian history. They are a piece of our family story that we might rather avoid thinking about or telling. But, avoiding an understanding of this history makes us more likely repeat it and that is something we absolutely cannot do.

Because the passages and phrases that have been used to justify supersessionism and anti-Semitism come up most often in Lent and Holy Week, Lent is an important time for us to talk about this, and it’s my intention to do so annually.

Jesus was Jewish, and during his ministry he was clear that he did not intend to replace or abolish his faith tradition or the laws and scriptures of Judaism, but to be part of their fulfillment (Matthew 5). On the other hand he was in strong opposition to the Roman ways of occupying the land and oppressing the people, and consequently strongly opposed to the small group of powerful Jewish Temple authorities who had cast their lot with the Romans for the sake of their own power. Jesus was not demolishing Judaism, he is trying to demolish the religious institutional corruption of his time.¹ That’s what today’s passage is about. Faithful Jewish folks who lived far away from the Temple had to exchange money for animals in order to participate in the worship traditions of the time - that traced back to Jewish tradition in Deuteronomy 14. Yet, there were critiques of this system voiced by many of the Hebrew prophets.² And the problems identified by the Hebrew prophets were worse by Jesus’ day. The Temple authorities authorized by Rome and money changers had started to siphon off money from people, both taking an

¹ Pulpit Fiction Podcast for Lent 3b.

² <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/2/27/why-is-jesus-angry-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-3>

inappropriate portion for themselves and keeping the poorer folk from being able to worship at all. People were kept from God by a system that was created to help people connect to God but had evolved to keep some people from connecting to God. Even the Temple itself, built by Herod the Great - Rome's Jewish client king - was built on violence, oppression and excess taxes.³ Religion and Empire are never a good mix.

So Jesus engaged in two kinds of conflicts with other Jewish folks that get conflated in our minds. The first was a kind of intellectual and spiritual discussion of the proper ways to worship God and practice the faith. Our friend Rabbi Jaffe told our confirmands last week that in modern Judaism, "You get to truth by principled argument." My understanding of many of the debates Jesus had with Jewish spiritual leaders is that they were principled arguments leading both parties toward truth.

The other conflict Jesus engaged with was with select Jewish leaders who were working for and with the Romans to secure their own power and position, and consequently oppressing many of their Jewish and non-Jewish neighbors. Jesus criticized the temple procedures and the authorities turned him in. The Romans were threatened by a messianic figure criticizing their system so they killed him.⁴

But, by the time the Gospels were written down, especially the last of the canonical Gospels, John, those who followed Jesus had started to separate themselves from Judaism. First, the Way of Jesus was a movement within Judaism. Then it became separate from Judaism and as part of that shift, Christian leaders emphasized a separate and distinct identity. Here's something else that happened in these decades: the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 of the Common Era. After Jesus' death, but before the Gospel of John was written. So listen to part of the text from this morning with that timeline in your mind:

"19 Jesus answered, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20 They retorted, "It has taken forty-six years to build this Temple, and you're going to raise it up in three days?" 21 But the temple he was speaking of was his body."

Judaism had to be reinterpreted and reimagined after the Temple's destruction - how would faithful Jews connect with God in the absence of a Temple? This was one of the great tasks of Rabbinic Judaism which developed in that era.⁵ Likewise, the movement

³ Ibid.

⁴ Raymond E Brown, <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2018/03/30/passion-jesus-and-anti-judaism> Brown's sequence of the development of the Christian testament is critical to my understanding.

⁵ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/2/27/why-is-jesus-angry-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-3>

of Jesus' followers reimagined the Temple in relation to their teacher. Their teacher, rather than the physical Temple, became the way in which Jesus' followers understood their connection to God.

So, follow my logic for a moment:

Jesus, a faithful Jew, spends his ministry engaged in faithful wrestling with other Jewish spiritual leaders, and critiques the Roman authorities and those who were complicit with them.

After Jesus' death, some of Jesus' followers are Jewish and some are not Jewish and there's ongoing conflict between followers of Jesus who were Jewish and Jews who did not follow Jesus.

Eventually Jesus' followers shift from a movement within Judaism to a separate faith.

As they develop their identity, as humans so often do, they do so by defining what they are not. They create an *other*. "The Jews."

As the Gospels are written down, "The Jews" becomes short hand for "Jewish Temple authorities complicit with Rome." But the readers of the Gospels quickly forget that shorthand and Christians come to equate "the Jews" referenced in the Gospels with all Jewish people.

Raymond E. Brown puts it this way: "Anti-Judaism appeared when the death was interpreted through the optic of the then-existing bad relations between believers in Jesus (often no longer ethnically Jewish) and Jews who did not believe in him."⁶

Rome is responsible for Jesus' death, but the Temple authorities complicit with Rome are part of it, too.

In these early centuries, followers of Jesus focused more and more on Jesus' death, over his life and teachings - and thought about who to blame.⁷

Then, Christianity - a movement that in its beginnings was highly critical of Rome - became the official religion of Rome. Religion and Empire are never a good mix.

Which shifted the blame for Jesus' death to...."the Jews." And by a couple of centuries later, Christian persecution of Jews had begun, with scapegoating, anti-Semitism, and anti-Jewish violence commonplace for a a millennium and a half, and led to the deaths

⁶ <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2018/03/30/passion-jesus-and-anti-judaism>

⁷ See Constantine's Sword by James Carroll - referenced here:
<https://www.enotes.com/topics/constantines-sword>

of millions and millions of people.

We can say that we've become more enlightened in the post-Holocaust era, and indeed I think there has been a great deal of rejection of anti-Semitism, there's been significant repentance, and work on right relations with our Jewish neighbors through interfaith dialogue and friendship. But we cannot say that violent anti-Semitism is in the past: witness the Tree of Life Synagogue massacre just three years ago.

It also remains that our sacred scripture - such as today's text but especially passages like Matthew 27:25 - contains the seeds of anti-Semitism. Every time we read those phrases we must stop, examine them, and once again reject anti-Semitism. Every time.

When we are teaching our children what we hold most dear in our faith, we need to teach our belief in respecting our neighbors of every religious tradition. When the Christian family photo album comes off the shelf and our children ask, why did the Holocaust happen, we have to have the courage to say: because Christian theology got something fundamentally wrong, and our ancestors in faith allowed a terrible prejudice to develop, allowed that prejudice to justify violence. But we won't let that happen, ever again.

I have just one more connection to make.

Whenever we find ourselves othering people -

Thinking in our minds, or hearing out loud

That we are superior

That they are to blame

That they aren't worthy

That we should fear them -

It should cause us to stop. To examine. To clearly and boldly reject prejudice and othering of any kind against any group. It happens so often, even today.

The virus was originally discovered in China, so folks with Asian ancestry are targeted.

For example.

There are parts of the gospels that we have to do a lot of work on, to understand. We

might even, dare I say it, need to set some phrases we find in the Bible aside. But there is a teaching of Jesus,

In which he refers to the Jewish tradition,

and makes the practice of our faith plain:

³⁶ “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷ He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

(Matthew 22)

Amen.

Resources:

Mary Luti wrote this annotation for the Holy Week bulletins at First Church in Cambridge, UCC several years ago:

As Christians, we live under the burden of a sad and violent history of anti-Semitism, in the sobering shadow of the Shoah (Holocaust). It is critical for us to be clear about what our sacred texts mean when they make reference to “the Jews,” especially during Holy Week, when we contemplate Jesus’ death.

When the crucifixion narratives speak of “the chief priests and leaders of the people,” they are referring to officials who collaborated closely with the Roman systems of oppression, and were viewed with contempt by much of the Jewish community in their time. They should not be identified with the Jewish people of the past as a whole, and certainly not with Jews in the present.

It may be helpful to recall the cultural context of our Christian scriptures, emerging as they did from a small, originally Jewish community of believers in Jesus as the Messiah. All of the Gospels originated from Jewish communities. Jesus himself, was born, lived, and was crucified, a Jew. Any criticism of Jews from Gospel writers should be understood as the expression of differences of opinion among or about their fellow Jews. The gospels’ use of the term “the Jews” therefore, should

not be read as a criticism of the Jewish religion, and especially not as a condemnation of an entire people, either then, or now.

It is one of the bitter ironies of history that our sacred texts have been used to justify the persecution of the covenant people, from whom our Savior came, and who are created, as we all are, in the precious image of God.

Levine, Amy-Jill, Entering the Passion of Jesus. A Jewish biblical scholar teaches about Jesus' death. See also <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/holy-week-and-the-hatred-of-the-jews/11029900>

Borg, Marcus & Dominic Crossan. The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem

Carroll, James. Constantine's Sword. An investigation of the history and terrible consequences of Christian Anti-Semitism, particularly in the Roman Catholic church.

Brown, Raymond E. Resources include his Gospel commentaries, and <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2018/03/30/passion-jesus-and-anti-judaism>

Gomes, Peter. The Good Book includes a chapter on what he terms "Christianity's Original Sin," Anti-Semitism.

Stendahl, Krister. The Oxford Companion to the Bible, Anti-Semitism article.