

Hope About Hate - Steve Van Evera and Reebee Girash Dialogue Sermon / Draft 1.5
For Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington
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Text: Mark 10:17-31

17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' 18 Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother." ' 20 He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' 22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' 24 And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' 26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' 27 Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

28 Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.' 29 Jesus said, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. 31 But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

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Reebee - Let's begin with the elephant in the room - or should I say, the camel in the room. If you live in suburban New England, this story is hard to hear. On first hearing, this story says: wealth is a problem and rich people cannot open the door to heaven. I mean, Jesus literally tells this man "of many possessions" to, "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' This man comes to Jesus asking what he needs to do to have eternal life, and on first reading it sure sounds like - if you're rich, you're out of luck.

Okay, take a breath.

Jesus is always pointing toward God, and toward the building up of God's reign on earth. Jesus teaches us to orient ourselves to the common good. And in God's reign as Jesus describes it, there is enough for everyone. Two chapters ago in Mark, Jesus manages to feed thousands of people from just a little bread and fish. But the man who approaches Jesus says, what do *I* do to have eternal life? The man is centered on his own well-being; Jesus says turn toward the needs of your neighbor.¹

This dynamic starts at the beginning of their encounter. The man comes running up saying "Good teacher..." which in the honor / shame system of the day was meant to prompt Jesus to respond with a similar compliment, too.² But Jesus' response is to point toward God. Only God is good.

And this dynamic continues. Perhaps the rich man is expecting that his possessions, his success, earn him a spot in heaven. And Jesus says, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!' But this time, Jesus says it without the wealth qualifier. Jesus says it's hard for everybody. But! then ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.' And Steve, that right there is where I find hope every day. It's impossible for me, but with God, everything is possible.

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Steve: So Reebee, for many Christians, Christian practice is about finding hope. It's about seeing a path through darkness toward the light. Seeing ways to heal the suffering, the wrongs and the cruelties in our world.

I've noticed that that's a Reebee preaching theme!

Reebee: You were listening! That's good! It gives me hope that you've been listening for the hope! And hearing it! That's very hopeful!

¹ See also Ronald J. Allen & Clark M. Williamson, *Preaching the Gospels Without Blaming the Jews: A Lectionary Commentary*, p. 157.

² Both BibleWorm and Pulpit Fiction make this point.

Steve: But I'm thinking about a problem that seems pretty hopeless—sad and hopeless. I'm hoping you can find me a point of hope in the situation.

Reebee: What's the problem?

Steve: It's antisemitism. Hatred of the Jewish people. It's yet another of the many ways that people have found to hate one another. It's been around for quite a while—two thousand years! Folks have been trying to tame it or cure it the whole time. But it doesn't look like it will be going away any time soon. In fact we see signs that it's getting worse here in the USA, and even here in Lexington.

It's done great harm in the past—including harm you don't hear much about.

Most people know of Hitler's Holocaust during World War II. Hitler murdered 6 million European Jews during 1941-45. Overall the Nazis killed 2/3 of the Jews who were then alive in Europe, and 1/3 of all the Jews then alive in the world.

Before that, and less well known, was what might be called "the Holocaust before the Holocaust." This was a period of 700 years, from the late 11th to the late 18th century, when European Jews were treated with such cruelty by their European neighbors that many died.

The scope of the horror is suggested by comparing Jewish population trends to worldwide population trends during this era. The numbers are chilling. From 1200-1700 the total world population nearly tripled, rising roughly 175%. At about the same time, during 1170-1700, the worldwide Jewish population (which was located mainly in Europe after 1500) fell in absolute terms, by roughly 9 percent.ⁱ So others multiplied while the Jews became fewer. If the growth of Jewish population had equaled the growth of other groups, by 1700 the Jewish population should have been three times as big as it actually became.

In other words, during the centuries **before** the Holocaust two thirds of the world's Jews went missing. Where did they go? Where is everybody?

The most likely explanation is grim: the Jews were abused into converting to Christianity, or they died from poverty that their neighbors imposed on them, or they died by their neighbors' violence. In these years European Jews were widely confined to tiny disease-ridden prison-like ghettos, repeatedly expelled en masse from their homes, forbidden to work in most professions, forced to wear badges and hats that

identified them as targets for abuse, widely though falsely accused of horrendous crimes (cannibalism of children, spreading the Black Plague, and above all murdering Jesus), forced to convert to Christianity, brutally tortured and/or put to death by Christian Church inquisitors who questioned these conversions (think Spanish Inquisition),ⁱⁱ and most important, they were mass-murdered again and again. Between one-sixth and one-third of the Jews of northern Europe were murdered in the Rhine Valley in 1096 by Crusaders before they left for the Holy Land.ⁱⁱⁱ Tens of thousands of Spanish Jews were murdered in a wave of massacres that started in Seville in 1391.^{iv} Jew-hating Cossack armies murdered more than 100 thousand Jews and destroyed 300 Jewish communities in Poland in the so-called Chmielnicki massacres during 1648-1656.^v More than 100 thousand Jews were murdered, most by White Russian forces, in Ukraine during 1917-21.^{vi} Vast numbers of European Jews were killed in hundreds, perhaps thousands, of smaller massacres.

These cruelties extended even to the Middle East, where Christian Crusaders mercilessly slaughtered the Jews of Palestine during 1099-1291.^{vii}

The main purveyors of the anti-Jewish hatred that fueled this violence were Christian church leaders and followers. Through the ages Christian pastors have often organized their preaching around anti-Jewish messages. For example, Christian preaching in Holy Week has often featured passages from the Gospels of John and Matthew (John 18:18-19:16, Matt. 27:19-26) that seem to (inaccurately) blame “the Jews” for killing Jesus. Some Christian preachers also quoted a passage from John that denounces “the Jews” as sons of “the devil” (John 8:44). Really not nice! As a result, for European Jews Holy Week was a time of fear, as this anti-Jewish preaching often incited mobs of Christian worshipers to attacks Jews and destroy Jewish neighborhoods.

Some call antisemitism the oldest hatred. If so, we’ve had plenty of time to solve it! Two thousand years! If we haven’t solved it yet, Reebee, what hope is there that we ever will?

Granted, Christian conduct toward our Jewish brothers and sisters is better than it once was. But that’s a very low bar to reach, and we still have large room to improve. And we’re mighty late to the task, Reebee. Help me hope we can find our way to do it!

Reebee: Steve, you’ve raised some crucial points here. You’ve covered really important history and asked us what our Christian responsibility is. As a preacher, one of places I go to is the Bible - and how we understand this sacred text. Have you

noticed that this is one of those texts that has often been interpreted to mean Jesus is overturning Jewish teachings?

What often happens with this passage is preachers say, Jesus says the 10 commandments aren't enough, Jewish tradition isn't enough, you have to follow Jesus. That's Supersessionism in a nutshell. But Jesus *is* Jewish, and it turns out that his contemporary Jewish teachers were saying similar things. (In fact, the rabbis talk about an elephant going through the eye of a needle.³)

Let me quote Marilyn Salmon, to whom you introduced me. "Contrasting Jesus over and over against his Jewish contemporaries...is the most pervasive kind of anti-Judaism. The gospels themselves sound anti-Jewish. However, I maintain that they are not. The Gospels belong within the context of first century Judaism. They were written before Christianity existed apart from Judaism. We read the Gospels differently when we think of them as Jewish literature rather than Christian literature."⁴

Now, here's some good news in this text. Jesus tells us about an all loving and all merciful God (that good news comes directly from the Jewish tradition). What is impossible for mortals is possible for God. That's the word of grace that we need especially when we encounter tough texts.

When we do the work in our Biblical study, it matters. It also matters when we check our other practices - our hymnody, our liturgy, the way we talk about Jesus. Through this intentionality we're changing our own culture and practice.

But here's another thing we can do. We can show up. Local journalist Linda Wertheimer - a member of Temple Isaiah - wrote in the Boston Globe in 2017: "When Christians lead the battle against hate, it sends a powerful message."⁵

We have 2000 years of Christian practice to consider here - and while we in this room aren't responsible for the history you've so powerfully described, we are called to understand that history and make our part of the future of Christian practice better.

I wonder, Steve, if sometimes Christians cling to tradition the way the rich man in our text clung to possessions. And perhaps part of the good news is that we have an

³ "The Talmud (b. Ber. 55b) uses a needle's eye and an elephant to make the same point." The Jewish Annotated New Testament comment on Mark 10:17-31, pages 91-92.

⁴ Marilyn Salmon. Preaching Without Contempt: Overcoming Unintended Anti-Judaism. p. x.

⁵ <https://www.lindakwertheimer.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/rallyagainsthate72317.pdf>

invitation in this moment to release some traditions that have caused harm - so that we can follow Jesus' call to commit to the common good.

Is it harder for Christians to deal with Supersessionism and anti-Judaism than it is for a camel to get through the eye of a needle? Yep. It's pretty hard.

But when things feel impossible, because don't things feel impossible?? - that's when we come back to God's grace, all sufficient, to strengthen and guide us toward eternal life, toward the reign of God on this earth: 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

Reebee - Amen?

Steve - Amen.

ⁱ Jewish population figures are from Sergio DellaPergola, "Some Fundamentals of Jewish Demographic History," table 2 and figure 2, online, also published in S. DellaPergola and J. Even (eds.), *Papers in Jewish Demography 1997* (Hebrew University, 2001): 11-13. Worldwide population numbers are an average of four estimates collected by Wikipedia and published online at "Estimates of historical world population," downloaded 12/17/23. These estimates are taken from the Population Reference Bureau (PRB), (2016); the Historical Database / Global Environment (HYDE), (2010); Jean Noël Biraben (1980); and Colin McEvedy & Richard Jones, *Atlas of World Population History* (1978).

ⁱⁱ On the Christian inquisitions see Cullen Murphy, *God's Jury: The Inquisition and the Making of the Modern World* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013). Summarizing the Spanish inquisition is Phyllis Goldstein, *A Convenient Hatred: The History of Antisemitism* (Facing History and Ourselves, 2012): 106-7.

ⁱⁱⁱ James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews: A History* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001): 257.

^{iv} Joan Comay, *The Diaspora Story* (Steimatsky's, 1981): 130.

^v Martin Gilbert, *Routledge Atlas of Jewish History*, 8th ed. (Routledge, 2010), 56; and Israel Pocket Library, *Anti-Semitism* (Keter, 1974): 207. Some sources indicate that more than one-fourth of the Jews of Poland died in these massacres. Goldstein, *Convenient Hatred*: 14.

^{vi} Gilbert, *Routledge Atlas of Jewish History*: 90.

^{vii} Gilbert, *Routledge Atlas of Jewish History*: 29.