

Born from Above
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"Born From Above" Pilgrim Church UCC, March 12, 2017, (John 3:1-17) Second Sunday in Lent

We may have heard about some incidents of anti-Semitism in our country of late. Graves of Jews were desecrated outside of St. Louis and in Philadelphia and there's been threats made against Jewish Community Centers and synagogues in alarming numbers. Lest we think this isn't hitting that close to home—there were threats made against synagogues and JCCs in Springfield, Framingham, Brighton, Worcester, and Newton at the time of my writing this sermon on Thursday. If you Google "JCC threats in Massachusetts" you can read what's been happening more thoroughly.

It was Muslim activists who raised money to fix those headstones destroyed in St. Louis and people of all faiths and no faith at all have condemned these threatening acts against the Jewish community. The Southern Poverty Law Center has a tab on their website called "HATEWATCH" to report some of these incidents that we may not even hear about from other news sources. For the March meeting with our Lexington Interfaith Clergy Association, we're talking about ways that faith communities here in Lexington can stand in solidarity with groups that have been increasingly targeted.

We Christians of course are in the midst of Lent, and we must keep in mind that Christian scripture has sometimes been used for anti-Semitic purposes. John's Gospel in particular has been used (and abused) by those who seek to pit Christians against Jews. Because of this shameful history, Christians have a responsibility to stand up for our Jewish friends and neighbors. We may even have moments where we must clarify the relationship between Judaism and Christianity if we overhear any hint of hate speech. So this morning my aim is to give you some tools and to be able to clarify the meaning of some of these troublesome texts in the Gospel of John specifically.

First and foremost, let's remember (as we heard an often divisive text just now) that Jesus and his earliest followers were all Jewish. We may not know everything about Jesus, but we do know that he was a Middle-Eastern Jewish man. As scholar Amy-Jill Levine states, "Jesus of Nazareth dressed like a Jew, prayed like a Jew (and most likely in Aramaic), instructed other Jews on how best to live according to the commandments given by God to Moses, taught like a Jew, argued like a Jew with other Jews, and died like thousands of other Jews on a Roman cross."^[1] As we head into Holy Week soon to come, we must call to mind that Jesus died a Roman death on a Roman cross. Crucifixion was used to execute runaway slaves and political insurrectionists in particular, to serve as a deterrent to anyone who disturbed the peace of Rome.

Further, Jesus and his earliest followers held the Torah and the Prophets as sacred and prayed the Psalms. Jesus continued in the line of Jewish prophets and like them: was a phenomenal public speaker, used symbolic actions, called for a moral and religious renewal within Judaism, and risked political persecution. Jesus proclaimed what he believed God wanted and what the Torah taught and what the people must do. Levine writes, "This historical anchoring need not and should not, in Christian teaching, preclude or overshadow Jesus's role in the divine plan. He must, in the Christian tradition, be more than just a really fine Jewish teacher. But he must be that Jewish teacher as well."^[2]

Some of the issues Christians face when contemplating our relationship with Judaism stem from those texts about Jesus and his role in the divine plan that seem exclusionary toward other religions. Many are found in John's Gospel—Jesus says, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." [3] Or think of John 3:16 (probably the most famous verse in the Christian Bible)—John 3:16 seems pretty much as exclusionary as you can possibly get! God loves the world so much that God gave humanity Jesus. If we believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior, we won't burn in hell. Instead, we'll have everlasting life in heaven. That's the typical theological interpretation one hears in Christian circles.

Though Marcus Borg has a fabulous analysis of John 3:16 in *Speaking Christian* which our Bible Study class read together. Borg encourages us to remember that the world was created by God and God loves the divinely created world. Do we really think God wants God's own beloved creation to perish? Sure that happens in the story of Noah's Ark—though even if we take that story literally, God promises to never do that again! God makes a covenant with Noah and his descendants to never destroy all life by the waters of a flood.

So God gave God's only Son. In John's Gospel, this refers to the Incarnation (a major theological theme throughout.) Remember how John begins: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." [4] God loves the world so much that God is with us in the world God created and loves and wouldn't want to perish! But there's the part about everyone having to believe in Jesus. We think of the word "believe" in modern terms, about believing theological claims made about Jesus. But in antiquity it could mean as Borg states, "Beloving Jesus, giving one's heart, loyalty, fidelity, and commitment to Jesus." And the final phrase about eternal life—in John's Gospel this is a present experience—to know God and Jesus now is to already participate in eternal life to come. Borg says that John 3:16 is really about "Beloving Jesus and beloving God as known in Jesus, in the incarnation, and entering into 'the life of the age to come' now. It's not about people going to hell because they don't believe. It's about the path into life with God now." [5] Anyone who uses John 3:16 to exclude others who aren't Christian should start reading all of John's Gospel! Historical and scriptural context matters.

We also must bear in mind that when John's Gospel was written, the community to whom he was writing were in the midst of a difficult time. Karoline Lewis (who teaches Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary and who I had the privilege of hearing in a seminar at The Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas) reminded us that the Gospel of John was written during an intra-Jewish debate. We can think of it as being written at the height of a family fight. There were Jews who came to believe in Jesus as Messiah and they were in conflict with those who didn't. The best evidence is in the Gospel when a Greek word (*aposthagōgos*) is used three different times that means being put out of the synagogue (John 9:22, 12:42, and 16:2.) Lewis explains that, "John is writing for a community that had been ostracized for belief in Jesus and now needed to hear what Jesus means in no uncertain terms. The absolution of this Gospel, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me' is an example of this kind of sectarian language, representative of a community that sees itself as most certainly outsiders, but then in a position of having to justify to themselves and to others their choice to follow and believe in Jesus." [6] Karoline Lewis thus encourages preachers to feel free to alter the text in places and when John writes "the Jews" say instead the "Jewish leaders." Because that's what we're really talking about here since all of Jesus' followers were Jews! This may all seem too specific or getting into the nitty gritty, who cares? But considering these recent acts of anti-Semitism nation-wide and right here in Massachusetts, the language we use in Christian churches really matters because there has been this idea perpetuated by Christians throughout history that "the Jews" killed Jesus. And it's just not true and has led to unspeakable harm.

Let's end by considering this whole born-again deal because though it may seem to not be our cup of tea in the United Church of Christ—there's hope here for us too. For born-again Christians, the story of Nicodemus in John Chapter 3 is of central importance. Jesus and a Pharisee and Jewish leader named Nicodemus have a good conversation about matters of faith. Jesus emphasizes being “born of the Spirit” three times in the passage as well as being “born from above.” John is the most metaphorical of our four Gospels—so John is reflecting on the metaphor of rebirth. If we are born of the Holy Spirit, it's about the radical transformation of our lives. Being born-again is about leaving an old life behind to enter into a new life with God. The Apostle Paul often talks about dying and rising with Christ, being a new creation, or being crucified with Christ. In Mark, Matthew, and Luke, this concept is often explained by bearing one's cross and following Jesus. Though no matter how any of our Gospels or Paul's writings turn the phrase, the concept is about spiritual rebirth.

Being born-again is actually a central concept for all Christians—it's not about having to interpret the Bible literally or excluding other religions. As Marcus Borg explains, being born-again “describes our transformation, and ultimately, the transformation of the world, for those who are born of the Spirit of God as known in Jesus share God's passion for a more just and peaceful world.”[7] New life in God transforming us, and then the possibility of you and me going out to transform the world is central to all of Christianity. Leaving our old lives behind, new life with God, being new creations, and then going out to do something about it—this makes us not just better Christians, but better people in general. At the end of the day, being born-again is about the radical transformation that comes from having a trusting relationship with God. The transformation helps us to celebrate diversity and be especially loving toward anyone who faces persecution or discrimination like John's own community. And so my friends, we can be born from above and we can go out to share God's passion for a just and peaceful world. God certainly needs us. May it be so. Amen.

[1] Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, 51.

[2] Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew*, 20.

[3] John 14:6, NRSV.

[4] John 1:1.

[5] Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words have Lost their Meaning and Power--And How They Can Be Restored*, 163.

[6] Karoline Lewis, *John: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries*, 5-6.

[7] Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian*, 169.