

Mark 12:28-34

What would Jesus Do?

#1 in a Series on Jewish Roots of Christianity

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Our topic for this month is the “Jewish Roots of Christian Faith”. Most of us have heard about how fundamentally important it is for our Jewish neighbors to get in touch with their Jewish roots. Many people make it a priority to stay home on Friday evening to begin Shabbat with a special family meal. Some insist on Hebrew School for their kids. Others send their teens on a trip to Israel to learn about their Jewish heritage. All these rites and rituals remind Jews of their religion and help them stay connected to their cultural roots.

But who has ever heard of Christians getting in touch with our Jewish roots? Why would we want to? Didn't Jesus leave all that centuries ago? Haven't we forged our own new faith distinct from the Jews? (Question for our Confirmation class? What religion was Jesus? ) It is easy to forget that Jesus was Jewish. That very notion sounds like a trick question on a trivia contest. Even if we know it, but what does it really mean? What impact does Jesus' Jewishness have on us?

Let's start this conversation by being honest about our feelings and our prejudice. What have you heard about the Jewish faith? What do you believe? Here are some things I have heard....

- Judaism is a religion that focuses on the law – Christians believe in love.
- Jews worry about keeping the commandments but we try to show mercy like Jesus did.
- Jesus argued with the Jewish leaders because they were hypocrites.

- Jews worry about the letter of the law instead of upholding the spirit of it.
- The Jews are responsible for his death.
- Most Jews still wait for the Messiah; they don't believe he has already come.

Let me start by saying that there has been prejudice on both sides of the Jewish Christian divide and there has been for centuries. The seeds of anti-Semitism were sewn into the New Testament and they have done a lot of damage.

Many of these prejudices against Jews have fueled some of the darkest moments in modern history – the Jewish ghettos of the Middle Ages, the Pogroms in Europe, the Inquisition in Spain, the Holocaust in modern Germany. No continent or country has been immune to the deep wounds of anti-Semitism. Too often in inter-faith conversation, Jews quickly feel victimized, and Christians feel guilty. So, nothing positive happens.

I believe it makes a difference that Jesus was Jewish. A Jewish Jesus changes him, changes our faith, and changes our relationship to all the Jewish we know. The fact that Jesus was Jewish is a gift we are just beginning to acknowledge and receive.

When I was 6 years old my family moved. We left Westchester County, New York and moved to a suburb of St. Louis. My parents chose a house in a town with good schools. When we arrived, we discovered that the town was predominantly Jewish.

As a new first grader I was just eager to make new friends. One day the kids of our neighborhood gathered to play and we were all getting along, so they told me that they wanted to show me this new circle dance they knew. Pretty soon we were holding each other's shoulders, kicking our legs and singing, "hava nagila". I liked the energy of the circle and felt flattered that they had included me in this new dance which they knew. While I sensed it, I was too young to appreciate how special this

moment was, or how formative. But I hope that we can encounter this topic like children- just trying to learn a new dance. Let's come to this series with openness, and with fresh eyes. What can we learn as we explore our Jewish roots today?

**In the first place we have more in common with our Jewish brothers and sister than we realize.**

In the passage that we read today Jesus tells his followers we should love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. He is quoting the central tenet of Jewish law. Quoting Jewish law, he is reminding people to keep these verses in our hearts. The Bible tells Jews to recite this guidelines to children, and talk about it at meals. The Bible tells us to remember it when we lie down and when you rise up. When we hear the word law we assume it is a strict rule, but in fact it is more like good advice. Put God first and you will be happier.

It is not a context between laws or grace. But Jewish rabbis understood that the biggest challenge to faith is not whether it is loving or not, but whether it is relevant or not. That is why so many Jews put a mezuzah on their doorways – simply to remember God as they go out into the world and as they return home. When Orthodox men worship they put on a prayer shawl and that looks so foreign to us, but it signifies the comfort which people of faith can find in wrapping themselves in an alternative wisdom- the wisdom of God's ways and God's perspective.

Last week many of you made prayer beads – a custom ancient in tradition and widespread across many faiths. Why – to remind people about their faith each day. Amy-Jill Levine is an orthodox Jew who teaches the Bible is a southern seminary. In her new book entitled The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus. She compares the Jewish prayer fringes to the bracelets that many Christians wear. They have the initials- WWJD. What would Jesus do.? Every day they remind folks to live in light of his example.

Like prayer beads in your pocket or around your wrist, these symbols recall your faith all day long these are all similar devices to urge devotion. If we take this notion seriously and want to explore what Jesus would do- we need to understand Judaism- or else Jesus will remain a stranger to us.

**Secondly, we have misunderstood many of the stories about Jesus.** Today's story is a good example.

In our passage today we find Jesus sparring verbally with one of the scribes while people watch. Leaders of the Jewish faith are rabbis. Rabbi means "teacher". We assume that teachers sit in the front of a room and students take notes. But that was never the Jewish teaching model. Jews believed in learning through discussion.

20 years ago I was asked to preach at Temple Shir Tikva in Winchester, while I was serving a church there. I was a little nervous so I found a sermon on King David that had been well-received. People were cordial at the service, but there was a certain wariness in the air. As I got into my subject I was pleased to watch the crowd warming to the topic. As I made my points I could see heads nodding, and smiles of interest here and there. So I felt relieved when I sat down with a sigh. Little did I know that this was when the fun really begins in most synagogues. One by one people got up to ask questions. I had to keep reminding myself that it was a compliment to garner so many questions, because this exercise was much harder than delivering the sermon.

You remember that Jesus stayed in Jerusalem when he was twelve and debated with the rabbis for a few days. That was an achievement. He won their respect early on. His ability to engage with Pharisees and Scribes would not have troubled his own disciples, but been a source of pride. Debate was a prized skill, and a sign of wisdom, a gift from God. Discussions were ways to air doubts and go deeper. They were opportunities to hone and refine our understandings of God. It was never a contest with a winner. When people talked openly about faith – all the listeners were better for it.

Let's look at the Good Samaritan. Most of us read this parable of Jesus as a story that appears to criticize the Jewish leaders. The Priests and Levites ignore the man who is bleeding on the road after being robbed and assaulted. To our ears it sounds like a rebuke of Judaism; perhaps is it? This whole parable introduces a debate. As Jesus demonstrates the temptation to become so wrapped in faith's rules that you lose your compassion for others, he starts a discussion about faith and how you put it into action. As we listen or eyes drop on Christ's rebuke of his own faith, we assume that we can improve on it. So we are quick to condemn the Jesus faith instead of admiring Jewish ability hold one another to such high standards of compassion.

When we visited Israel we had the opportunity to walk through Capernaum, a village excavated on the Sea of Galilee where Jesus was believed to have headquarters of his ministry. One of the most interesting sites in Capernaum is the synagogue. The building has no roof and you can only see the traces of its structure but you see enough to appreciate the floor plan in the synagogue. There was no raised podium where a speaker would deliver oratory. There were not arenas with good acoustics, but small conference rooms. All around the walls had built-in building benches. So it was clear that people gathered in the round to pray, and **then to** discuss the readings from scripture. The architecture itself points to places of lively debate. Judaism is not a performance sport. The audience is part of the show. Next week I hope to allow time for discussion after the sermon.

**Finally the Bible is one story not two.**

I believe we have done a great dis-service to scripture by dividing it between Old and New Testaments. You cannot understand Jesus if you fail to understand the Hebrew faith he talked about and the Jewish customs he observed and the Jewish law he recited regularly. Jesus was Jewish. Peter, Paul, Mary Magdalene, James -- all Jewish. In fact everyone who wrote this Holy Bible we all love was Jewish.

When we read the Bible as two Bibles instead of one we become blind to our own prejudice, our own anti-Semitism. Jesus saw himself as a Jewish sage, healer and prophet. His considerable spiritual power gave him the opportunity to debate with his own elders, and to offer reforms, creative criticism, and suggestions for how to increase the integrity of Judaism. Jesus probably never imagined the impact of his life; nor did he probably ever intend to start something new. While a new faith emerged from Judaism, it was much more like a birth than a revolution. These debates we see as a rebuke of the Jews were the labor pains of this new expression of faith in which God was the midwife. Rather than seeing Jews as people we can improve upon, let us look again at parents in faith who set a wonderful foundation for our tradition. The Jews were never our enemies; they are our parents. We should regard all Jewish people as fellow pilgrims, sojourners on this same spiritual path and often wise trailblazers, from whom we have much to learn.