

Matthew 5: 17-20
RABBI JESUS
Sunday March 17, 2013
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When I get to the theme of “Jesus” in my confirmation curriculum, I always asked the question: What religion did Jesus belong to?” I usually get the right answer: Jewish. Then I asked another question, just for fun: What religion did St. Paul belong to? The answer usually is more hesitant: Jewish? Right again. Then one more question: What religion did the writers of the New Testament belong to? Now we have reached the guessing stage: Jewish, again? Correct.

Think about it: all that we are - as Christians -, all the written materials that we have – the New Testament -, our first leader – Jesus -, and our first theologian – Paul -, are firmly rooted in Judaism. I don’t know if that line of thinking still blows you away, or if it is old news to you. In some ways, it still blows me away because it challenges me to unlearn some of the stuff that I was taught in my Sunday school lessons and in seminary.

Granted the de-Judaization of Christianity is already visible within the New Testament. Paul’s mission turns to the “Gentiles” (Acts 13:46) after having begun preaching in the synagogues, and the Christian movement increasingly became Gentile rather than Jewish in its constituency and outlook with the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. Once the movement landed in Rome, the separation of the two seemed complete.

For centuries, good faithful people have forgotten or ignored the fact that Jesus, their Lord and Savior, was a Jew, deeply rooted in the history, religion, and culture of his people; a man in love with Torah, shaped by the prophets, captivated by Sabbath, entranced by wisdom. And as we forget the Jewishness of Jesus, the church can too easily lurch into an ugly and deadly anti-Semitism as it has many a time. We cannot understand Jesus without paying a lot of attention to the Hebrew Scriptures and history. Who Jesus was and what he taught was grounded deeply in his faith, Judaism.

So, who was Jesus? As we continue in our sermon series on the Jewish roots of Christianity, let me share with you what Israeli novelist Amoz Oz has to say about Jesus:

“[Jesus was] one of the most genuine Jews who ever lived. I often call him Rabbi Jesus – “rabbi” being a Jewish word that does not mean “prophet” or “holy” but simply “teacher.” And a teacher he was: a non-orthodox Jewish teacher who wanted to take Judaism back to what he regarded as its pure origins, or forward

toward what he regarded as its uncompromising consequences. In modern terminology, he lived as a reforming Jew and died as a non-conforming Jew.” (“Globe and Mail” - March 18, 2000)

Jesus –was not just firmly anchored in his faith, he became a teacher of his faith, a Rabbi. We have to assume that he had many teachers. In Biblical times, the quest for knowledge was highly valued but the primary purpose of education was to train the whole person for lifelong, obedient service in the knowledge of God.

For many centuries the center of learning was the home, and the parents were the teachers. They instructed their children not just in the matters of daily life, but were responsible for passing on their faith. Eventually the synagogue became the religious/educational center where young boys as early as 5 started their religious education. (Marvin Wilson, *Our Father Abraham*, Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., pp. 278)

Whoever Jesus’ teachers were, they did an outstanding job. Jesus honored the tradition and the Torah; attended synagogue and Temple; he was in love with the God of Israel. And because of the good teachers he had, Jesus was determined to bring the tradition, the Bible and the ritual to new life – as Amoz Oz said, “[he] wanted to take Judaism back to what he regarded as its pure origins, [and] forward toward what he regarded as its uncompromising consequences.” Jesus was a reformer, a teacher who re-interpreted the law and the prophets so that they spoke freshly and newly to the people of his own time.

Jesus did that. He was a good teacher, engaging head, heart, and body – just like good teachers do. He did that by giving the occasional sermon, but his specialty was story telling, parables that exploded in your mind – prodigal sons, good Samaritans, workers in the vineyard.

He was good with one liners as well that caught you off guard, puzzled you, made you think: It’s harder for a rich person to get into heaven than for a camel to get through the eye of a needle; new wine needs new wineskins; render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and unto God what is God’s; leave the dead to bury the dead; you cannot serve two masters, you cannot serve God and Mammon.

And then of course, he taught by example, walking the talk, so that his own life was a parable. Hard to ignore a teacher like that; who lived his own teaching; showed you what it might look like; invited you try it for yourself.

But what is it exactly that he taught? Scholars agree that the heart of his teaching was centered in the Kingdom of God. He kept announcing over and over... it’s coming soon, it’s at hand; it’s breaking in; it’s in your midst; it’s within you.

What is the Kingdom of God you ask? Well, just for a moment, take the metaphor literally, and imagine the kind of world it would be if God were king/the center of all that is, and as the Lord's Prayer states it, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

When I think of God's will for this world, words like justice, peace, forgiveness, second chance, third chance; wholeness come up. Or let's remember some of the one-liners and stories that Jesus taught, that the kingdom is like yeast, the pearl without price; a banquet where everybody is welcome; a runaway kid coming home into his father's arms. It is the world transformed, healed, made whole. It's seeing in a new way; it's repentance.... which is not about carrying around loads of guilt, but rather a change, a turn-around in the way we act, we live. It's about love... love God, love your neighbor, love yourself, love your enemy.

Jesus taught people how to live differently. We can live by conventional wisdom - which is what our culture tells us is needed to get ahead. All those proverbs... The early bird gets the worm; practice makes perfect; keep your nose clean; all those lists... the ten best ways to make friends, get ahead in business, how to make the most out of your portfolio! That's conventional wisdom; that when followed will lead to success, usually; barring unforeseen circumstances: success usually being defined as more stuff... wealth, pleasure, and power. Or we can live by an alternative wisdom – wisdom that takes us right back to talking about love; and forgiveness; sacrifice; grace; spirit power; compassion; joy.... (these two concepts are borrowed from Marcus Borg)

One gets the impression that Rabbi Jesus challenges the status quo of his faith to a point of change, right? Just read through the Sermon on the Mount, and we get a whole list of how to do things differently – no more an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, no more seeking revenge, no more following the law if it hurts or devalues another person; the list of changes is long.

He seems to walk away from his Jewish faith into something new that has not yet been defined, and which I think has made it easier for generations of Christians to see Jesus in a non-Jewish light, and make him the founder of Christianity (which I trust you know, he was not).

But that is not the case: He himself said: "I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." It is a bit confusing, isn't it?

Maybe what Scholar Jaroslav Pelikan has to say on this might help. He wrote that there is no doubt that Jesus affirmed and gave permanent validity to the Law of Moses. What he is doing in his teaching is "an intensification of the commandment, not just to include its outward observance but an inward spirit and motivation of the heart." (Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Illustrated Jesus Through the Centuries* [Yale University Press 1997, pp. 9-23])

The point simply is this; When laws become heartless, they need to be changed. When laws don't allow for forgiveness, grace, spirit, compassion and joy, they need to be reformed. That is what Jesus did and taught, and that is what got him into trouble.

Jesus – the man, the teacher, the prophet - has inspired people for centuries. We are here because there is something so compelling about this man and his teachings. His teachings are as relevant today as they were when he shared them in the synagogue, on mountain sides, or around the dinner table with his friends.

Our task today is to continue Jesus' work, to figure out what it means to bring the kingdom of God into reality, or if nothing else, to get a taste of it.

Defining it is hard. We know what it cannot be: the status quo in the church, in our culture and society. We can talk about it in general terms of justice and peace for all. But as I look around this sanctuary, I get the sense that the realization of the kingdom of God takes on very personal dimensions, laced by people's passion.

We might get a glimpse of it, or might actually believe in it – the kingdom;

When each child has a loving family in which he or she can grow and thrive;

When we have immigration laws that are fair;

When each person is loved and accepted just they way they are, and not the way we want them to be, or fit in, or think, or conform;

When no one goes to bed hungry;

When no one has to die because of lack of health care;

When everyone seeks to be the best steward of the earth;

The list is created by each of us and our passions, our sense of urgency.

But we also need to remember our passion for God's kingdom here on earth is not just our individual vision for a better world; it is God vision, God's dream, God's wisdom as well. It is God's invitation to life abundant, for ourselves, our neighbors, and the world. Amen.