

Bethel AME Church
Insights from the Rabbis 2B
Class Notes 2/13/22

Last week I began giving some examples to help us think about how we can move beyond the sibling rivalry between Christians and Jews into a more positive and productive relationship. I cited a story Rabbi Sacks tells about meeting with African bishops when he was a seminary student. It ended up being a transformative experience for him, and I am sure for the bishops as well. But he also spoke of the initial reluctance that his seminary Principal had in agreeing to this meeting because of historical antisemitism in the Church. If we are to be able to share with one another and work together we Christians must face that reality in our past and how it continues to affect our relationship today.

When I first began what was to develop into what has now been a decade-long engagement with Judaism, I was simply trying to get a handle on the book of Hebrews. But in doing so I realized that I could not adequately understand or teach Hebrews until I had wrestled with 2000 years of Christian hostility towards Jews and Judaism and how the book of Hebrews had contributed to that hostility. We do not approach the Bible with uncluttered minds, and those people who think they can just open up a Bible and hear what it has to say directly to them are ignoring the fact that their reading has been shaped by centuries of human tradition. So in my class on Hebrews I made the unprecedented decision that before looking at the text, we would spend the first half of the year looking at the history of some of that human tradition, at the Christian anti-Judaism that has obscured and distorted how we read the Scriptures. Christians tend to read the Bible with a bias against Jews and Judaism (conscious or unconscious) that we have inherited from our traditions.

This has nothing to do with how you may feel personally about your Jewish neighbors or coworkers. I am not accusing anyone of being antisemitic. But we have been handed anti-Jewish ways of interpreting the Bible that have shaped Christian theology and continue to be taught in the church. Judaism has been viewed as the wrong sort of religion, an oppressive religious system that Jesus came to free us from. Jews are all about legalism and “works righteousness” while Christians are all about love and grace and freedom. When we read the gospels we have been conditioned to see the “Jews” as the bad guys, religious hypocrites who mindlessly adhere to empty rituals and customs. We Christians have been given a superior religion that is above all that.

One of the clearest examples of the distortion created by Christian anti-Judaism is that traditional Christian theology has essentially omitted the history of Israel from its telling of its own story, from its self-understanding and its understanding of God. The Christian story we tell ourselves moves from creation to fall to redemption in Christ. This is what we at Bethel know as the so-called “Roman Road to Salvation,” which many people think is the heart of the gospel message.

I have argued that this narrowing of the gospel that grew out of the church’s rejection of its connection to Israel damaged Christianity in no small measure. Lost was the Old

Testament focus on this world, on the goodness of creation and its pleasures, on the communal nature of salvation, on justice here and now for the poor and marginalized, on the covenant responsibility of *tikkun olam*: repairing and redeeming and blessing the world. Judaism could have been God's balancing voice to the individualistic, intellectualized, spiritualized, otherworldly message of Christians. But the Roman Road has none of that. It is a direct product of Christian anti-Judaism.

Ironically, the Roman Road was constructed from three verses lifted out of context from a letter in which Paul is wrestling most intensely and most painfully with the whole issue of Israel's place in God's plan of salvation. Indeed, I have repeatedly used what Paul says in other parts of that same letter to construct a counter-argument to the Roman Road, a different path for understanding what God is doing and how Gentile Christians fit into that plan. The title of this course comes from Romans 11.

It is my contention that we have lost our ability to read and understand the Scriptures properly because of our attempt to make Christianity intelligible apart from the story and the teachings of Israel. Christian anti-Judaism has blinded us as to how to interpret the Bible and robbed us of many of its treasures. In this course I have been trying to rectify that, to explore some of the ways in which Torah continues to be God's word for God's people, and to think about what it means for us that God is still committed to the covenant made with Israel.

So the approach I have taken in this course is that of the African Bishops. We have been trying to listen to and learn from Jews, learn things that will enrich our understanding of Jews, of the Scriptures, and our Christian faith. The more I study and reflect, the more I am convinced that this is vital for the Church. But I also believe that the dialogue can be a two-way street, that there are things that Jews can learn from Christians, even though at this point in time I would be hesitant to say what those things might be.

Of course we will not always see things the same way. That is the whole point of the dialogue. But as Amy-Jill Levine says, we can learn to disagree without being disagreeable. Or as the Talmud says, we can learn to argue for the sake of Heaven, for the sake of a greater understanding of the Divine Mystery. Prof. Levine makes this insightful and typically witty comment on the whole venture: "Jews and Christians will disagree. Jews will also disagree with other Jews, and Christians with other Christians. The day that Jews and Christians agree on everything is the day the messiah comes, or comes back" (*Misunderstood Jew*, p. 6). But we have more in common than we think. And it is what we have in common that can be the starting point for mutual respect and dialogue and cooperation and genuine friendship.

2. I would also like for us to remember the example of Amy-Jill Levine, the Jewish New Testament scholar, who had experienced Christian hostility to Jews both as part of her cultural heritage as well as in her own personal experience. She grew up in New Bedford, and most of her friends were Christians, but as she got older she also began to experience Christian antisemitism. She comments on her first encounter with the New Testament:

"I had, fortunately, been inoculated against seeing only hate. My Christian friends had modeled for me the grace and friendship that are at the heart of the

church; my parents told me that Jesus was a Jew speaking to other Jews, and that his basic message was exactly the same as that of Judaism: ‘to love the Lord your God’ and to ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’ So I knew that, although the New Testament could be read as anti-Jewish, it did not have to be read that way” (*The Misunderstood Jew*, p. 5).

The pain caused by Christian antisemitism was not eradicated but at least it was offset to some extent by the loving behavior of her Christian friends so that she could open the New Testament, read and study it, and now encourage other Jews (and Christians!) to do the same. Because she was able to do that, she has been able to help some Christians rethink their understanding of the New Testament and challenge them to look more closely at the misunderstood Jew, Jesus. That has been a great gift to the Christian world, and to me personally. [The slide shows a picture of Prof. Levine with Marc Brettler who co-edited *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* presenting a copy to Pope Francis.]

I want to suggest that we must first hear Jesus’ words “As you do to the least of these my brothers, you do to me” (Matt. 25:40) and understand them literally. Who were Jesus’ brothers? “James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas” (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3), or in Hebrew, “Ya’akov, Yosef, Shimon, and Yehudah.” When we look at our Jewish neighbors, we must see not only the image of God but also the face of our brother Jesus. We need to recognize and repudiate our sinful history of anti-Judaism and antisemitism, acknowledging that most of those who killed Jews during the Shoah were baptized Christians. Christians should not be levelling the charge of Christ-killers against Jews but rather acknowledging that throughout history we have been guilty of crucifying Jesus over and over again.

We have not been a light to the world with respect to God’s chosen people, with respect to Abraham’s children, our estranged family, nor have we blessed them as we should have (Gen. 12:3). We have not followed Jesus’ command to be servants to them as he was. For the most part we have not modeled the love and grace towards Jews that we claim is the heart of our faith. Instead, historically Christian behavior has erected a huge wall of separation between us. We can only approach our Jewish brothers and sisters with an attitude of humble repentance, grace, and love, without expecting that they can easily forget two thousand years of hatred, but with the hope that from time to time that they will be pleasantly surprised, as Jacob was with Esau, and be willing to embrace us.