

TEXT: Ephesians 4:1-6

August 6, 2006

A RABBI, A PRIEST AND A MINISTER . . .

When you're a pastor you get used to people coming up to you and asking, "So, did you here the one about the rabbi, the priest and the minister?" There must be dozens of jokes that start out that way. One of my favorites goes like this.

A rabbi, a priest and a minister were out fishing in the ocean one day when their boat got blown way off course. Soon it became clear that they were completely lost, and without food or fresh water, they were going to all perish. So they decided to prepare to meet their Maker by hearing one another's confessions.

The rabbi was the first to go. After he spoke of a few minor indiscretions, he said, "But the worst thing I've done is that I've failed to keep kosher. For years I have eaten bacon or ham for breakfast. Oh if my congregation only knew!"

The priest went next. He spoke of a couple of little wrong doings and then he said, "But the one thing I'm most ashamed of is that for the last twenty years I've been dating a woman in the next town over. If my parishioners knew they'd be so shocked!"

Just as the minister is about to offer up his confession, a Coast Guard cutter appears on the horizon. The three men are saved!

But as they are being lifted onto the rescue boat, the rabbi and priest turn to the minister and say, "You never told us your greatest sin."

"Oh," says the minister, "That's easy. I'm love to gossip!"

I'm happy to report that things are a bit better among the clergy here in Westport and that we have a mutually supportive relationship. And while we kid one another and often share a joke or two, we also have built up a significant level of trust among ourselves, and therefore are able to discuss very serious issues, even and especially those on which we disagree. As Protestants, Catholics, Unitarians and Jews we have talked at length about Iraq, human sexuality, abortion, the effect of materialism on our young people and the difficulties of parenting in Fairfield County. Some of those conversations have happened one-on-one, some in larger groups.

One of the things we did a while back was attend a showing of Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* as a group. We then sat for two hours and discussed our thoughts and feelings about the film. We discussed its historicity, its artistic merits, and, naturally, we debated whether or not the films, and its creator, were anti-

Semitic. We all agreed anti-Semitism was and is a bad thing. In fact we used the word evil to describe it. What we didn't agree on was the film itself, whether or not it's portrayal of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus cast Jews in general in a bad light. Was the film anti-Semitic or not? We couldn't reach consensus. But that was OK. We agreed to disagree.

Sadly, events that transpired last weekend raise the question anew. For, during a drunk driving arrest, Mel Gibson uttered some remarks that were clearly anti-Semitic. In the midst of a string of profanities, he said things like "Jews are responsible for all the wars in the world." (TMZ.com, 7-28-06)

It is not my intention to stand here in judgment of Mel Gibson. And it is my sincere prayer that his apology this past week and his desire to make amends is sincere. But it is my intention to help us all think for a few minutes about the issue of anti-Semitism. For, despite the wonderful collegiality of Christian and Jewish clergy in Westport and elsewhere, despite the fact that many if not most of you have Jewish friends, and even Jewish family members, anti-Semitism is still very much alive in the United States and elsewhere.

The truth of the matter is that anti-Semitism is an issue the church has had to deal with practically from its inception.

We must always remember that Jesus of Nazareth was a practicing Jew. He lived in a country largely populated by Jews. He spent most of his time preaching, teaching and healing Jews. The scriptures he read were in Hebrew. He observed Passover and kept the Sabbath. There is no question about it: Jesus was a Jew.

And so were his first followers. Even after his crucifixion and resurrection, most of the folks in the early church were Jewish. They were Jews who had come to the conclusion that Jesus was the promised Messiah, the one sent by God to save the people. But that didn't change their practicing the faith, not at first. They still kept kosher; they still went to synagogue on Friday nights and laid down their work through Saturday sunset. They offered sacrifices at the Temple. And then, on Sundays, they gathered to remember Jesus on the day he had been raised from the dead. They listened to the apostles tell stories about him; they shared bread and wine, even as he had on his last night with his friends.

But then things started to change. Paul and others started preaching about Jesus in non-Jewish territories. And many decided to follow his way. Eventually a debate erupted—should non-Jews, Gentiles, who become followers of Jesus, be required to keep the Jewish law? Should they be required to go through circumcision, keep kosher and maintain the Sabbath?

The church leaders finally decided the answer was no. And so in time, things began to shift. More and more Christians came from gentile backgrounds. And the church looked less and less Jewish. It could no longer be considered a sect of

Judaism, at least not by those in the know. It became a religion unto itself know in time as Christianity.

Our lesson from Ephesians reflects that growing sense of distinctiveness. Whether we are Christians from a Jewish background, or a Gentile background, we have “one faith” writes the author. Not meaning that they all had exactly the same *beliefs*, but rather a common commitment to Christ. What makes us the church, what binds us together and makes us different, he says, is our faith in Jesus.

But the Roman authorities were not in the know. And they couldn’t tell the difference between Christians and Jews. None of them would offer incense at the altars set up to honor the emperor. None of them would bow before his image, nor worship in his temples. All of them insisted there was just one God—and only one God.

As a result, Rome began to persecute them all, Christians and Jews alike. If a Christian did something to upset the Roman authorities, they went after Jews as well. And visa versa. Indeed, the writer of Ephesians appears to have been caught up in one of those dragnets. He refers here and elsewhere to his being imprisoned due to his faith. He identifies himself as “a prisoner for the Lord.”

As a result of these persecutions both Christians and Jews began to say and do things to distinguish themselves from each other. And in time such words and actions on the part of Christians, degenerated into blanket statements about Jews in general, that were nothing short of hateful. And anti-Semitism took off.

You may know the history of anti-Semitism. You may know about how Jews were forced to live in ghettos in much of Eastern Europe. You may know about forced conversions, the Crusades, the Inquisition and the Holocaust. But this is not just a problem from the distant past in far ways places. Right here in Fairfield County there have been recent examples of anti-Semitic graffiti, and, up until very recently, certain towns in our area had unwritten rules that made it virtually impossible for Jews to buy homes and move in. Anti-Semitism isn’t just out there, it is in our very midst as well.

In our passage the author of this letter to the Ephesians urges his readers to live lives “worthy of their calling . . . Be completely humble and gentle,” he writes, “be patient, bearing one another with love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” (4:2-4) I love how Eugene Peterson translates this section: “[M]ark that you do this with humility and discipline—not in fits and starts, but steadily, pouring yourselves out for each other, alert at noticing differences and quick at mending fences.” (*The Message*, 2130)

While the author is specifically addressing the need for Christians to live in harmony with each other regardless of their backgrounds, his words could just as easily be applied to how we should relate to persons of other faiths. Clearly, there is

no room in this moral code for anti-Semitic behavior. In fact, I would argue, it obligates us to work at overcoming all forms of prejudice. It obligates us to do all in our power to right ancient wrongs and mend fences.

There are, of course, those who argue anti-Semitism isn't such a big problem. But I disagree. It is still very much with us and not just when a Hollywood celebrity gets drunk. A story that appeared in the *Times* a week ago Saturday illustrates.

Back in 1976 a young girl named Mona Dobrich moved into Georgetown, Delaware with her family. She was nine at the time, and as she grew up she was the only Jew in her school.

As a young adult she married a local fellow, a Christian, and then had two children. She is bringing them up in the Jewish faith.

Georgetown Delaware is a fairly rural place, and throughout the years Christian prayers have always been a part of things like school dinners and PTA meetings. And while it made Mona uncomfortable, she let it go.

But then in 2004, at her daughter's graduation, a local minister offered a prayer and in the prayer said that faith in Jesus was the only way to salvation. Imagine you were Mona hearing that as you sat in the audience. Imagine you were her daughter!

Mona decided to take action. She approached the school board and asked that in the future prayers be more generic. But folks were not pleased. They started to hassle Mona and her family as well. Her younger child, Alex was called names and started receiving threats. Kids told him he ought to move.

At a public meeting of the board of education, 11-year-old Alex bravely but nervously read a statement: "I feel bad when kids in my class call me 'Jew-boy.' I do not want to move away from the house I have lived in forever."

Later in the same hearing another speaker, addressing his remarks directly at Alex's mother Mona, said: "If you want people to stop calling him Jew-boy you tell him to give his heart to Jesus." (New York *Times*, 7-29-06, A-10)

There is more to the story. Eventually the Dobrich family did move. Suffice it to note, that this is not the way Christians should behave. In fact, we should be doing all in our power to combat such thinking!

Anne LaMott, in her last book, talks about a friend of hers named Sue. Sue has two nieces who are Jewish. Recently someone told Sue that those nieces wouldn't be going to heaven because they didn't believe in Jesus. LaMott writes: "I told [Sue] . . . that there was not one chance in a million that [her] nieces wouldn't go to heaven, and if I was wrong, who would even want to go? I promised that if there was any

problem she and I would refuse to go. We'd organize." (*Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, 269)

Maybe we all need to organize and say no to exclusivism!

My friend Bob Orkand is the Senior Rabbi at Temple Israel here in Westport. A few days ago we had lunch together. Our discussion ranged all over the map, but a good deal of it focused on the current situation on the Lebanese-Israeli border.

While any discussion of issues in the Middle East must take into account religious concerns and implications, our conversation focused on international diplomacy and regional politics. It was about the Israeli and Lebanese governments, Hezbollah and terrorism, the UN and our country's leaders. It wasn't about Jews and Christians and Muslims at war—it was about nations and organizations at war. At several key points, Bob and I seem to disagree. But that's OK. We sometimes do. That won't make him hate all Christians. It won't make me utter anti-Semitic remarks.

I called Bob to ask him if it was OK to mention our conversation in this sermon. (Unlike the guy in my opening story I'm not a gossip!) "I won't go into great detail," I said, "I just want to talk about our discussion in general terms."

"Of course it's OK," he said, "For that matter, say anything you want, I trust you implicitly."

And I would say the same thing to him. Over the last five years we've grown to trust each other.

But despite our mutual respect and affection for one another, I don't take our relationship for granted. It's built on a lot of give and take. It's rooted in a mutual willingness to be patient with one another, to be humble in our opinions, and gracious in our disagreements.

I'm a Christian, I follow Jesus. Bob's a Jew, he doesn't. There are significant differences in how we understand God, life and even death. But discussing those differences honestly and openly, seeing one another as fully human, recognizing that we are each loved by God strengthens not only our relationship, but our respective faith journeys as well. It makes me a better Christian. It makes Bob a better Jew.

Friends, as Christians you and I are called to deal with Jews, Muslims and all other people of faith in ways that reflect our faith in a loving Christ, not in ways that try to impose that belief on others.

There should be no room in the church for anti-Semitism of any kind. To behave in such a manner is not only wrong, it also dishonors the very one we call Lord.

In fact, it may be best summed up by an old bumper sticker that I once saw on a fellow Christian's car. "My boss," it said, "Is a Jewish Carpenter."

**--Amen
John H. Danner**