

**“A CONTINUOUS HISTORY OF GRACE”**

**1 Kings 17:8-16, 17-24; Luke 7:11-17**

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Last week I received a phone call from a young Jewish woman who has recently fallen in love and received a proposal of marriage. Her love affair has proven to be a mixed blessing, however, because her beloved comes from a Christian family. Her would-be mother-in-law, Marianne, is a charismatic evangelical Catholic, who professes herself thrilled that Anna is Jewish; thrilled because Steven (the son), in bringing Anna into his family's orbit, has given Anna the possibility of becoming that most happy of beings—a “completed” Jew. How many of you are familiar with that phrase, a completed Jew? It's used to describe a Jew who comes to accept Jesus as the messiah and his or her personal savior.

“The problem is,” Anna told me, “I don't feel incomplete now.” As we drank coffee over the next hour, the contours of the problem came into sharper focus. “Marianne is a kind and loving person,” Anna said, “but she has some pretty odd ideas about Jews.” These ideas included that Jews still participate in animal sacrifice as part of worship, that Judaism has no sense of an after life, that all Jews observe the dietary regulations, and, most interesting of all, that the recipe for Passover matzohs includes human blood, to remember the slaughter of the Egyptians.

As Anna spoke, it was clear she had her own interesting ideas, hers about Christianity: Christians believe all Jews are going to hell; Christians only give charitable contributions to other Christians; Christians don't care how you behave, only what you believe; the Christian Bible says that killing Jews is a blessing.

I don't know whether Anna and Steven will in fact get married, or how their marriage will fare if they decide to go ahead. I do know that the level of religious ignorance and misunderstanding displayed by both Marianne and Anna—two intelligent, well-educated, well meaning women—is not uncommon, either in our culture or in too many cultures around the world. And it is unfortunate on many levels. I don't have to tell you the social and political cost of such misunderstanding. You can see that pretty much every day on the 6:00 news. But when it comes to Christian misunderstanding of Judaism, I would assert that Christians who are ignorant of or misunderstanding of Judaism are, because of that, ignorant or misunderstanding of our own religious tradition.

Jesus was a Jew, an observant faithful Jew, one who stood firmly within his tradition, one whose ministry was deeply continuous with the theology and practice of Judaism. Look at this morning's scripture lessons. The similarities between Elijah and Jesus are striking. In both cases, the holy man of Israel, with the help of God, performs miracles and heals the sick. In both cases, these gifts are bestowed not on fellow Jews but on gentile neighbors. Elijah and Jesus stand together, related in their shared tradition. And if we miss or misinterpret that connection, then we stand to miss or misinterpret who Jesus was, what he was doing, and why he was doing it—essential questions for Christianity.

So what I want to do this morning is to take this opportunity to share with you what I consider the top three mistakes Christians commonly make as they approach Jesus in his Jewish context. I don't claim this list to be definitive or authoritative; and it's certainly not exhaustive. If you ask another minister or theologian, you'll probably get a different answer. But these are my top three .

The first idea on my list is the idea that there is a radical distinction between the Old Testament God and the New Testament God, that somewhere between the end of the book of the prophet Malachi and the beginning of the gospel of Matthew, God took a happy pill, had a personality change, and turned from being a God of violence, vengeance, and judgment into being a God of love and peace. There is no doubt that there are stories in the Hebrew Bible that are brutal, haunting, difficult for us to square with a God who is loving and good. Sometimes a look at context helps reframe the stories in helpful ways. For example, the conquest stories of the Old Testament. We don't want God to have anything to do with conquest. We want God always to be about peace. But what if you live in a world where the two choices open to you are to conquer or to be conquered, to kill or be killed? Period. No third choice. How would you tell stories of your experience of the divine if that was your reality? And who are we to judge those who lived in that world and told their theology based on their experience? We, for the most part, have the luxury of never having had to live in that position; we export our wars and violence so we don't have to make the choice every day to live or die and know God in the midst of that.

We want simple good and simple evil, love and peace securely separated from violence, judgment, and death; and we won't find that anywhere in the Bible. Some of Jesus' sayings in the New Testament are every bit as terrifying as the words of the Hebrew texts. "I have come not to bring peace but a sword." "I will cast them out into the outer darkness where the fire is never quenched and there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth." There is love in both testaments, law in both testaments, grace in both testaments; there are texts of terror in both testaments. There is one God for Jesus the Good Shepherd and Moses the law giver, Joshua the warrior, Elijah the prophet, and the nameless lover who wrote the Song of Songs. We will never be quite comfortable with that God, but maybe we aren't supposed to be comfortable with our God.

So that's number one. Number two on my list has to do with the relationship between Jesus and those whom he taught—disciples, Pharisees, the rulers of the Temple, the crowds. The mistake Christians have made in reading of Jesus's teaching is to assume that Jesus stood outside of 1st century Judaism and found it fundamentally flawed, overburdened with picky meaningless rules, hypocritical. Many believe that Jesus did not respect the Jewish law, the holiness code, the traditional observances. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Jesus criticized his tradition always as an insider. He observed all of the strictures of the law, unless he was actively debating them—as in who could be healed on the Sabbath. He challenged and corrected, because that is the nature of teaching. He engaged in heated debate because such debate was an established mode of discourse within the rabbinic tradition. How many of you have sat through a church service where the minister challenged you to be more faithful to the gospel in either general or particular ways? Did you interpret that to mean that the minister thought you had completely perverted Christianity? Why is it so hard for us to make that leap with Jesus. The world of 1st century Judaism was intellectually and spiritually lively, diverse in its expressions and engaged in ongoing, yes, sometimes heated dialogue. Jesus was, among his other aspects, a great teacher of the

law; he loved and respected the law as God's gracious gift to the people, and he called the people to its highest and fullest practice. If we come to Jesus' teaching with that assumption, we will much better understand the nature and meaning of his ministry.

Number 3, most often in the gospel of John but also elsewhere in the gospels, we read about "the Jews." The Jews did this; the Jews did that, and usually that phrase is associated with something bad that the people did. Whenever we see that phrase, we have to remember that up into some time in the second century, Christianity was one of several Jewish sects. In other words, when reading about "the Jews" in the gospels, that term is meant to refer to Jesus' own people--his disciples, friends, the crowds that drew around to hear him teach. And especially when we get to the story of the crucifixion, and the crowd--referred to as the Jews--cries out, "His blood be on us and on our children," this is again Jesus' own who are saying this. Jesus' own. That translated would be not some other group out there somewhere, but us. The point to the story of Jesus' betrayal, abandonment, and death is that those actions belong not to someone else, but to Jesus' own: to us. The church's misreading of who is to blame for Christ's death has resulted in a staggering legacy of bigotry, violence, and wanton cruelty to Jews across the centuries. It has also led us Christians away from the towering miraculous import of the Gospel: that those Jesus returned to, those whom Jesus loved, those the God of heaven and earth continues to love and uphold, are not some group of innocents who stood with Jesus through his final ordeal, but all of us, even capable as any of us are of cowardice, disloyalty, looking the other way, and every other sin under heaven. Jesus died for us, and came back to us, proving for all time that God's power to love embraces all of us, no matter what our sin or indifference. Unless we understand ourselves to be "the Jews" in this story, we lose the fullest measure of its grace. Unless we understand Jesus in the context of his Jewishness, we will miss ever more of what he would teach us. In two millennia, Christianity and Judaism have grown widely apart, yet our roots are sunk deep in the soil of Jesus' religion. We need to honor that as we would discover who and what we are. Thanks be to God. Amen.