

Being A Good Neighbor
The Misunderstood Jew
Matthew 22:34-40

(Matthew 22:34-40 NRSV) When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, {35} and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. {36} "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" {37} He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' {38} This is the greatest and first commandment. {39} And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' {40} On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

This morning I am continuing our *Being A Good Neighbor* series, we will look at, what most of us probably believe is the easiest religious tradition for us to understand. But, my hunch is, that we make many false assumptions about Judaism.

But before we begin, I need to remind you of our starting point. Before we can truly look at other faith traditions, we need to stop and reflect on what we believe about other religions in general.

Last week I suggested that there are three primary ways to understand, or view other faith groups.

One is what I am calling an **exclusivist** approach. This viewpoint understands that Jesus is the ONLY way.

(John 14:6 NRSV) "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Unless someone ascends to the belief that Jesus is Lord and Savior, they are excluded from the kingdom.

A second approach is what I called the **inclusivist** approach. This viewpoint would suggest that God knows what is in everyone's heart, whether or not they have come to know Jesus. But within this viewpoint there are both soft and hard understandings. The hard understanding would argue that if they have had the opportunity to know Jesus, and rejected him, they would be excluded. While the soft version would not go that far.

The third way of seeing other faith groups is what I called a **pluralistic** approach. This understanding believes that most religions have equally valid paths to God. People who hold this viewpoint see their neighbors religious journeys as equally valid, and so desire to understand one another and learn

from one another, because they are not threatened nor do they threaten each others core beliefs.

It is essential that we understand where on the spectrum from an exclusivist to a pluralistic approach we are. Because how we understand relationship to God will greatly affect how we see our neighbors who are different from us.

Without a doubt, I understand Judaism better than I do either Islam or Hinduism. I have read the Hebrew Bible (what we rather pejoratively call the Old Testament) many times. I continue to attempt to learn Hebrew. I have made 9, or so, trips to the Holy Land, spending one month there last September, and I will lead a pilgrimage to Israel right after Christmas. I have spent time not only at the Christian sites, but spent many hours at Jewish sites, both ancient and more modern. I have read countless books, trying to understand the culture and climate that Jesus of Nazareth comes from.

But how well do we really understand Judaism?

How much of our understanding is through the filters of 2,000 years of Christianity?

- We tend to view Jews as people who just didn't get it. They were the people who Jesus came to, yet they not only rejected them, but most of us carry the view presented to us by Mel Gibson in *The Passion of the Christ*, that they are the Christ killers.
- We view Jews as greedy. We see them as Shylock in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*.
- We view Jews as stubborn. Unwilling to let go of the Holocaust and using it to beat up the rest of the world so that they can get what they want, or at least using it to justify how they act toward the Palestinians.

I hope you understand that my stereotyping is what the problem is all about. Whenever we put people into a group and begin to say things like "all Jews" are Christ killers, or "all Jews" are greedy, we are adding to the problem.

Some people look at somebody like Jimmy Swaggart, or Jim Bakker and say: "All Christians are like . . ."

Is that a fair statement.

ABSOLUTELY NOT

There are greedy Jews and angry Jews just like there are greedy Christians and angry Christians.

So, lets be careful before we start that type of stereotyping.

And just like there are Christians that are Conservative and others that are Progressive and everything in between, so too in Judaism.

In the United States there are three primary groups of Judaism. And the interesting thing is all three groups are present in Northwest Indiana.

Orthodox — these are the ones that we often see on the news, sometimes wearing garb that seems to come, not from Israel but from nineteenth century Poland. So while the Hasidic, would come from this branch, so too would the Lubavitch (the group that has a presence here in Munster) They would argue that the Talmud and the Torah come directly from God (Much like fundamentalist Christianity would say about the Bible).

Conservative — Congregation Beth Israel here in Munster is from this branch of Judaism. They too believe that the Torah came directly from God, but they would not say the same about the Talmud.

Reform — Temple Beth-El represents this branch, and Rabbi Stevens from this congregation will be with us on Wednesday night to correct the many mis-statements that I make today. This is the branch of Judaism that most of us are probably most familiar, because their belief structure is probably closest in line with most of the people here at Ridge. But the Reform movement, much like Protestant Christianity is very broad, and hard to label.

I used some terms that I probably should identify.

The Hebrew word *Tanak* is often used to describe the Hebrew Bible, it is the first letters of the three sections of the Hebrew Bible. Those three sections are:

TORAH — often poorly translated as LAW, but it really means more than that, maybe a better way to understand it would be calling TORAH the revelation of God given to Moses. And that is of course, the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

The other parts of the Hebrew Bible are the:

NEVI'IM — which we would call the prophets and also the books that tell of the prophetic period, First and Second Samuel, Kings and Chronicles.

KETUVIM — or the writings. This is the remaining books: Psalms, Job,

Proverbs, etc.

The other main Jewish Holy Book is what is known of as the Talmud. This is composed of the oral tradition of the great Rabbi's of Judaism as they sought to interpret TORAH. It is divided into a number of sections, but probably the most familiar is the Mishnah which is commentary on Torah.

At the center of Jewish belief is a statement that in Hebrew is called the Shema, which means "hear". It is found in the book of Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 6:4-5 NRSV) Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. {5} You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Jesus, when asked what was the most important commandment of the Torah answered:

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

So the center for both Jew and Christian is a claim on the supremacy of God. Both traditions claim that they are monotheists — that we believe in only one God.

The Lord our God is One

The funny thing is, Moshe, a shop owner in the Old City of Jerusalem argues that this is the biggest dividing point between Christians and Jews. He argues that we (Christians) are not monotheists, but that we believe in three Gods.

Father
Son
Holy Ghost

But Jesus is, of course, the great divide between Jews and Christians.

Who was Jesus — Messiah, or prophet?

What is interesting is watching how Jesus' study has changed.

Fifty years ago, people did not even see Jesus as a Jew — I am not sure what they saw him as — but his Judaism was pretty much denied.

Fifteen years ago, Rabbi Jacob Neusner wrote his classic, *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus*, in which he argues that Jesus was poor Jew.

“If I heard what he said in the Sermon on the Mount, for good and substantive reasons I would not have followed him.”

“Where Jesus diverges from the revelation by God to Moses at Mount Sinai, he is wrong, and Moses is right.”

“We Jews maintain, and I argue here that the Torah was and is perfect and beyond improvement, and that Judaism built upon the Torah and the prophets and writings, the originally oral parts of the Torah written down in the Mishnah, Talmuds, and Midrash — that Judaism was and remains God’s will for humanity.”

“Jesus instructs people to violate at least three of the Ten Commandments.”

“By the truth of the Torah, much that Jesus said is wrong.”

For Rabbi Neusner, Jesus failed to fully understand the revelation of God in the Torah.

Last year, Amy-Jill Levine wrote: *The Misunderstood Jew*, in which she (a Jew who teaches New Testament at Vanderbilt University) argues that Jesus was a Jew who we as Christians have misunderstood and interpreted to the detriment of Jewish - Christian relationships.

She goes to great lengths to show the commonality of Jesus and Judaism.

But the big question remains DO JEWS BELIEVE IN THE MESSIAH?

Unfortunately, there is not a simple answer to that question. The more conservative groups clearly pine for the day when the Messiah will come. But for the more liberal groups, they believe that through the Torah we already have all the tools that we need to usher in the Messianic age.

Amy-Jill Levine wrote:

“For Jews, the system is complete: there is no need for a New Testament, for the Torah and its interpretations within the Jewish community already offer revelation of the divine.”

Jews may or may not be looking for a messiah — but they universally agree that Jesus was not God’s Messiah.

The goals of Judaism and the goals of Christianity are pretty similar.

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

And how do we do that?

(Micah 6:8 NRSV) He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Come out Wednesday night.

Join us for dinner

or just come and join in a discussion with Rabbi Stevens

Learn how we can be good neighbors to our Jewish brothers and sisters.