

“Our Noxious Burden”

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Continuing a series on the Gospel of John

John 8:31-47

March 26, 2017

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you make your home in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?” Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, everyone who practices sin is sin’s slave. Now a slave does not live in the family’s home forever, but a son makes his home there forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are Abraham’s descendants. Yet you are looking for a way to kill me, because my word finds no place in you. I am telling you what I have seen with the Father, and you are doing what you have heard from your father.”

“Abraham is our father,” they answered. “If you were Abraham’s children,” said Jesus, “then you would be doing what Abraham did. Yet you are looking for a way to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did no such thing! You are doing the works of your father.”

“We were not born of sexual immorality!” they protested. “The only Father we have is God himself.” Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear my word. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not standing in the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks from his character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don’t you believe me? Whoever belongs to God hears God’s words. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.”

New International Version (adapted)

That stretch of Scripture begins wonderfully, and ends terribly.

We start with a promise. What a promise! By his word, his teaching, Jesus is creating a home for us. His is a magnificent home in which we can dwell in freedom. Live in his words, Jesus promises, and you will be free: free from slavery, free to finally live, to be truly free.

But . . . in the argument that follows, Jesus fires up a way of thinking that is dangerous. What he says has proven deadly! We have to face that first — the danger and the deadliness — if we have any chance of getting to his freedom-promise.

II

First, the danger Jesus fires up. He divides the world up into two groups:

- those who are for him, and those who are against him;
- those who believe him, and those who doubt him;
- those who receive him, and those who reject him;
- those who belong to God, his Father who sent him, and those who belong to the devil, who lies and murders.

Does the world divide neatly? People disagree with me; are they liars because of it? People oppose me, so are they murderers? Are our adversaries on Satan's side? That's dangerous. Start thinking this way . . . and we can justify anything we do to them. They are liars, so we can lie about them. They are murderers, so we can kill them. They are devilish, so we can destroy them. This makes atrocity appropriate!

This good-evil, us-them thinking is so dangerous.¹

III

It has gotten deadly. Christian ethicist Richard Hays calls this Scripture "*the most deeply disturbing outburst of anti-Jewish sentiment in the New Testament.*"²

The Gospel of John uses the phrase "the Jews" (*ho ioudaioi* in Greek) again and again. Sometimes it is simply about a particular ethnic and religious identity. But often "the Jews" gets used for those who disagree with Jesus, oppose Jesus, plot against Jesus, and kill Jesus.

But the Gospel of John can't be using "the Jews" as a blanket term for an entire people. Almost everyone we meet in the Gospel is Jewish, including those who receive Jesus, follow Jesus, stand with Jesus, and love Jesus. And, of course, Jesus himself! All Jewish!

¹ Frederick Dale Bruner describes the danger well: "Here is metaphysical dualism of the most radical — and dangerous — kind. This dualism can, if we are not very careful, venomize our Christian relation with our co-religionists or our theological enemies and so betray Jesus' command, counterculturally, to love even our enemies (Matt. 5:43-48). It can lead us to believe that all our enemies are all God's enemies as well and that the devil is the father of all our opponents." *The Gospel of John, A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 543.

² Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 427.

Through most of Christian history, however, people who bear the name of Christ have spewed the venom that all Jews, in all times, are guilty of opposing and killing Jesus. Today's reading launched the noxious slander that Jews are "*children of the devil*." That because they have not followed Jesus — and most have not — God has revoked God's promises to them, cut them off, cursed them. This defamation has exploded in lynchings, pogroms, ghettos, deportations, and death camps. It still spreads today.³ But it's a lie!

So if we are going to learn gospel – Good News – from this passage . . . well, maybe we cannot. Maybe the best response is stunned, shamed silence. For Christian antisemitism is a stain upon the gospel. Christ's church has blood on its hands, the blood of his own people. And whatever the Gospel-writer John meant when he was recording and shaping these words (and I don't think he meant harm or hatred) . . . and whatever Jesus meant when he said something like this (and I know his way is only life and love) . . . the fact is, in the hands of his followers, the church of which we are part, this has become poisoned ground. Can anything good grow from it?

IV

"You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." How can we be free, indeed?

This is not easy.

Many of you will remember my friend, Rabbi Cory Weiss. He came and spoke with us about a year-and-a-half ago. His talk was "Why Judaism?"

Beforehand, I had the gift of speaking with his people. He is rabbi at Temple Har Zion, a Reformed Jewish *shul* (or community) in Thornhill.⁴ The Reformed movement is a liberal-minded branch of the very diverse Jewish family. Here is some of what I said to them.⁵

When I was a child, family friends, the Wilners, invited us to share their Passover Seder with them. I remember being allowed to drink the wine (pretty good for this lad of

³ Adele Reinhartz, a Jewish theologian at the University of Ottawa who has studied the Gospel of John extensively, writes that "This image of the Jews as children of the devil has echoed through the centuries, in theology, art, literature, and anti-Semitic invective, and, most recently, on the websites of neo-Nazi groups." Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Gospel of John (New York: Continuum, 2005), 20.

⁴ www.templeharzion.com

⁵ The Temple invited me to speak at its annual Selichot celebration, on August 31, 2013. I was asked to address the United Church's 2012 decision to advocate a boycott of goods produced in Jewish settlements within the occupied Palestinian territories. I spoke as a leader of a grassroots effort by United Church members, *United Against the Boycott* (www.unitedagainstboycott.ca).

Scottish Presbyterian roots!) Also, hiding the matzo, and getting money to give it back! And, of course, lots of food late into the night. And I remember Donna, the youngest, asking why that night was different. I went to Sunday School, I knew about Moses. But the way it was told that night, it was real. And present. And powerful. I realized our friends are part of something bigger, a Story both ancient and present, and in the deepest sense true. And they were welcoming us to share in that Story with them. The G-d of the Exodus has hold of me. The Wilner's hospitality, in G-d's name, has hold of me. I am bonded to walk with you, the People of Israel.

That's what I said to them. But our history makes it complicated.

For instance, especially in the 1980s and 90s, many Christian congregations starting having their own Passover meals. They did it for good reasons: to learn more about Judaism, and so more about Jesus. "Celebrate the Passover like Jesus did!" However, the Jewish Passover Seder today is quite different from what Jesus knew. Their traditions have developed over the 2,000 years since Jesus ate it with his first disciples. So when we take their celebration and make it ours, usually without asking . . . and especially when we tack on Holy Communion at the end . . . that's disrespectful, even hurtful.

This is not easy.

Last January, we looked at the Bible's Book of Esther. We finished up with a Purim celebration. Purim is the Jewish feast of Esther. I was careful, acknowledging again and again that we were learning someone else's tradition, telling someone else's story. But good motives are not enough. I don't think I got it right. It was my mistake. Disrespectful.

Because our history with Jews has been so poisoned by the actions of Christians, it won't be easy. We have so much to learn. We need to be humble and careful. And repentant.

V

I continue to be convinced that I can do my part in learning, in repentance, and reconciliation, only as I stay close and get closer to Jesus. My Jewish friends and I will continue to have different beliefs about Jesus — contradictory beliefs, opposing beliefs. That's why they are Jewish, and not Christian. And that's why I'm a Christian, not a Jew. That's okay! Part of my journey of following Jesus is learning to stand beside him, and love my neighbours, for he is loving them too.

Jesus started off with the promise: *"If you make your home in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."*

We are going to sing a song, “*Make Me a Captive, Lord.*”⁶ It’s an old hymn, though probably new to most of us. It builds on paradoxes: ideas that don’t seem to fit, but really do. We can only be free when Jesus holds us captive. We can only win the fight when we uncurl our fist. We only gain power when we are serving. And so on. This is very wise.

And, personally, I can only truly love those who do not follow Jesus — who do not believe in him, trust him, or worship him — Jews, Muslims, and many others . . . I can only truly love them, in the same way that I can only truly love anyone, by following and belonging to Jesus, by dwelling in the home is his making by his word, his home of freedom and peace.

⁶ Written by George Matheson, it was in the United Church’s *Hymnary* (1930).
See www.hymnary.org/text/make_me_a_captive_lord