

In the name of the Trinity: God, Christ and Holy Spirit. Amen

Antisemitism, the visceral distrust or hatred of Jews and Judaism, is an affront to God, our Holy Scriptures, and an insult to Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. I know we all agree on this.

As beautiful as the Gospel according to John articulates our hope in salvation, it also justifies Christian antisemitism. This account was written by an imperfect, biased human being. He was devoted to his Savior and dedicated to his community but had a vehement resentment of Judaism.

John's account contains the bedrock of Christian theological development. It helped move us from a messianic, pacifist Jewish sect to the Jesus Movement broader than any one culture, folding in Jews and Gentiles. It gave us a myriad of ways to encounter Jesus:

Jesus is the bread of life; the light of the world; the door; the good shepherd; the resurrection and the life; the way, the truth and the life; and Jesus is the true vine by which all people can be grafted into the household of God. Beyond an emperor, the Messiah leads the cosmos to salvation.

The final form of John did not appear until the end of the first century, 80-90 A.D. A time when Christian and Jewish communities were often in conflict because each was brutally persecuted by Roman authorities seeking scapegoats to blame for the ills of the Empire. After the Roman suppression of the Jerusalem Revolt in 60 AD, Jewish communities had to strike a careful balance between faithfulness to their obedience to God and preservation under an oppressive government. The Temple had been destroyed, their nation lost, even a hint of desire for self-governance was reason for persecution. For Jews, Christians calling Jesus "Son of David" was dangerous.

Christians were under suspicion across the Empire. They declared a Jewish prophet executed for treason against the Roman Empire as Savior of the World. They welcomed in marginalized people, refused to sacrifice to the Emperor or join the Roman army. Any hint they wished to overthrow the Roman regime resulted in crushing punishment. Gentile Christians didn't want Jesus and his followers to be lumped in with the violent Jewish revolutionaries of 60 A.D. who were slaughtered during the uprising.

Two communities of faith worshipping and obeying one God should have been in relationship. Instead, the brutality of the Roman Empire drove them to live as rivals.

In this context, John's account demonizes Jewish people outside the Jesus Movement. Today's reading holds a dangerous anti-Jewish claim: "[Jesus answered Pilate], 'My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews.'" This verse is used to assert that Jews killed the Messiah by tricking the Romans into crucifying him, as though Pontius Pilate was a just, equitable leader. Added to other New Testament passages Christians use this scene to justify the disenfranchisement of Jews from society, practice of torturing Jews to convert, the Holocaust which murdered six million Jews, and killing 11 people at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh.

This past Tuesday, we celebrated our diocesan Interfaith Thanksgiving Service¹. We had Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders participating. The theme is always from our diversity we find unity by offering gratitude in prayer to God.

In light of the massacre at Tree of Life Synagogue, Bishop Mark Hollingsworth invited Rabbi Stephen Weiss of B'nai Jeshurun Congregation in Pepper Pike to speak. He was a gracious and passionate preacher openly confronting the resurgence of antisemitism and welcoming the outpouring of mutual love and support. He urged us to speak publicly against religious persecution of any kind, to condemn it, and work in love together to heal the wounds that can fester.

Privately, I confessed my discomfort with one of the Thanksgiving readings used to condemn non-Christians. He shared with me a paper he wrote when he wrestled with a similar piece of Torah. He wrote, "it is possible to deal with these problematic texts by asserting that each contains some core value that God sought to transmit but that was corrupted by the ...biases of the receiver of that revelation."ⁱⁱ In other words, all scripture contains truth about God, but God's truth can be obscured by the people who wrote it down.

We cannot shrink from the hatred written into our holy texts. We must condemn interpretations that justify hatred or violence and antisemitism in all its forms: repeating antisocial stereotypes, demeaning jokes, conspiracy theories, and outright calls for oppression of Jewish expression. Be public in your love and respect for Jews and their culture. Then read our shared scriptures with Rabbi Weiss' simple guideline, "Love your neighbor as yourself...the rest is commentary!" Amen.

ⁱ Diocese of Ohio with Trinity Episcopal Cathedral, Cleveland, Ohio

ⁱⁱ *A Loving God Wants Us to Love and Be Loved: On the Acceptance of Homosexuality and Gay Marriage In Jewish Law* by Rabbi Stephen Weiss, B'nai Jeshurun Congregation, Pepper Pike, OH June 3, 2015