

You Are The Other, Brother
The Rev. Catherine Powell at Church of the Servant
August 3, 2008

Text: Roman 9:1-5

"...I am not lying when I say how great is my sorrow, how endless the pain in my heart for my people, my own flesh and blood! For their sake I could wish that I myself were under God's curse and separated from Christ." (Rom. 9:2-3)

In today's epistle Paul expresses his disappointment in his people, the Jews. He does it as a backhanded compliment. "For a stupid person who just doesn't understand things, Joe, you sure are a dedicated thinker." "You've got such a great family background and heritage, Suzy, and a wonderful education. Too bad you can't figure out how to use it." And he "generously" wishes that he could be cursed by God instead of them.

Without coming right out and saying Jews are (stupid? stubborn? add your choice of negative descriptors here), Paul lets us know—while being nice about it—that they are (negative word). Now if anti-Semitism weren't a problem in our world, we could just let this passage go. I mean Paul said opinionated things about women covering their heads in church, too (dooming some of us to wear ridiculous little beanies when in junior choir). We don't let that passage bother us. But statements that feed corrosive bigotry in the areas of gender and sexuality, and those that feed malice toward Jews, still lead to active violence in the world today, and we cannot let them slip by.

Our churches have tried to address some of the anti-Semitic passages of the New Testament. The passion narrative in the gospel of John has been particularly painful. We remind ourselves that the WHOLE story of Jesus is a Jewish story. It's not a bad guys, good guys story. Everyone in it is Jewish. Those who leave home and follow him: Jewish. Those who question him: Jewish. Those who stick by him through thick and thin, those who risk their lives to spread his message later, those who give of their wealth to support him: Jews. We know that his arrest and execution took place in a time and place ruled by the Roman Empire and that crucifixion was practiced not by Jews but by the Romans. We know all these things and yet, rather than feeling deep respect and honor for Jews, Western (and sometimes Eastern) culture has stereotyped and demonized them.

I saw a TV show that traced the relationship of the popes through the years with the Jews in Rome. Pope Paul IV in 1555 set up a Jewish ghetto near the Vatican. Jews were allowed out of the area (only in daytime) and marked with yellow cloth on men's hats, and yellow scarves or veils for women. They were required to attend weekly "compulsory preaches" to convert them. Old Jewish men were forced to race through the streets at Carnival for the crowd's amusement. Different governors and popes changed laws for the better...then for the worse again. The situation improved for Jews in the early 1700's, then became worse again in the 1780's. And in the early 1800's all the medieval anti-Jewish laws were revived! This was not that long ago.

I listened to my own word use recently. I might say, "She's a Hindu; he's a Muslim" but I rarely say "He's a Jew." At some level in my consciousness that sounds pejorative to me. So I tend to say "He's a Jewish scholar" or "She's rooted in Judaism." A Roman Old Testament scholar changed the title of her published timeline from "The History of Israel" to "The History of the Jews" in order to combat anti-Semitism. When we study the Old Testament we talk about the Hebrews or the Israelites or God's People. Now I know it isn't strictly correct to call Abraham a Jew. Judaism as we know it

had not developed. But the way we use language about people in the Bible makes our children surprised when we tell them that yes, of course Jesus and his disciples were Jews.

Lots of us have been through many a program on diversity, on inclusiveness. And I, along with others, have at times complained. I know I have underlying prejudice; everyone does. But I'm a good person. I'm aware. I am careful to be open. But no matter how good or careful we are, we still need to push ourselves, to probe our prejudices. For years I told people how glad I was that, though I had grown up in the south, I never heard my parents say anything demeaning or insulting about black people. It wasn't until well into adulthood that I—an educated and motivated person—began to appreciate the systemic prejudice that was the norm not only for “the south” but for *me*. My family and most people I knew had black workers in our kitchens and yards but a black business connection was unheard of. I never thought twice about how our maid always chose to drink her water out of a jelly jar glass, and always put it away in a special corner of the cabinet. And about how “generous” we were to help her when she needed dental work or her house flooded (not wondering why she lived in a tiny house in a flood prone part of town and why she couldn't pay for a dentist).

We have to keep pushing ourselves so we can see our prejudice and its effects. On Jews. On people of color. On those whose sexual and gender identity differ from ours. Look at what is going on in the Anglican church right now. Gene Robinson, a priest deeply loved and respected by his diocese—was elected bishop by those who had known and worked with him for years. The honor given to this one man—and the leadership asked of him—one man in one small diocese—has thrown Anglicans all over the world into turmoil. Because he is gay.

In today's Old Testament lesson, Jacob wrestles. He has been separated from his brother for a long time, and with good reason. He tricked and humiliated his brother. He lied to and used his father. He ran away. He is coming back with great fear. He has organized his family and workers so that his brother will meet them a few at a time—and cannot kill them all at once if he is as angry as Jacob thinks he will be. He has sent gifts to bribe Esau to be lenient. And in today's lesson, just before he is actually to meet Esau, Jacob is met in the night by this mysterious being with whom he fights. Who injures him. And who in the end lets him go onward.

Some say it was God. Some say the devil. I say he was wrestling with his past, his guilt, coming to accept the truth about himself. And in that wrestling God touched him with pain but also blessed him for his courage—his desire to make peace with his brother.

As individuals, as a congregation, and as a society, we must push ourselves. In today's gospel lesson we see how Jesus welcomed and fed everyone. One message of the miraculous division of the loaves and fishes is that there is more than enough for *everyone* at Jesus' table. Jesus confronted people of his day with their prejudices and contempt for others. We need to go out and reread the article *Black Man in Public Space*; read Rabbi Jonathan Sachs *The Dignity of Difference*; read Roberta Bondi's *Memories of God*; attend this fall's course about race relations in Wilmington; go online for Gene Robinson's interview with Terry Gross on *Fresh Air*. And we need to listen to each other; to hear about our own experiences, some of them bitterly dehumanizing.

Any time we find ourselves thinking of a human being as “one of them,” we need to push ourselves just a little farther as we continue in the path of Jesus who came, who taught, who died for many, for all. This is good news not only for “those others” but for every one of us, for we are Other too.

