

## **Christians and Jews**

Genesis 17:1-8, Romans 11, selected verses

“I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.” Romans 11:1

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This morning, I wish to say a word about Christians and Jews. The context of this sermon is the broader Presbyterian family of which we are a part, and, specifically, two actions that were taken at the last meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) that continue to cause reverberations within our denomination and distress to the Jewish community. The immediate context for us here at Morningside is that we have been focusing on some of the significant tensions of our time. Several Sundays ago, we dealt the relationship between faith and science, last Sunday with the relationship between religion and politics, and today, we finish the series with this sermon on the relationship between Christians and Jews.

The two controversial decisions by our General Assembly are these. First, the Assembly approved a recommendation to explore selective divestment of stocks owned by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in corporations that do business in Israel, “whose dealings in Israel support the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories.” The second action of the Assembly was the vote to continue the funding of a Messianic Jewish congregation in Philadelphia whose purpose is to convert Jews to Christianity. In the months since that vote was taken, Presbyterian church officials have decided to cease support to that congregation, not because of a disagreement with the mission of the congregation, but because the church has failed to attract new members and financial resources on its own.

I would be surprised if many of you here this morning are even aware of these two actions on the part of our national church. Among those Presbyterians who have followed both controversies, feelings have run very deep. Sides have been chosen, and harsh words have been exchanged. Those that disagree with the divestment recommendation are accused of being blind to the plight of the Palestinians. Those who agree with the divestment decision are accused of denying Israel’s right to exist. The stakes are high on all levels: moral, geopolitical, economic. The Presbyterian Church, through its Board of Pensions and through its Foundation, has invested assets of more than eight billion dollars. A decision to divest from corporations that do business in Israel would have significant impact on the Foundation, the Board of Pensions, the corporations involved, and, perhaps, events in the Middle East as well.

The decision about the Messianic Jewish congregation has also been controversial. It reopened the old, often bitter, argument over whether or not the Christian church should evangelize the Jews, in light of the fact that both Christians and Jews are bearers of the Covenant and share much common history.

I want to think with you now about one of the most perplexing and tortured relationships of the past two thousand years. I'm not going to tell you what you ought to think about evangelizing the Jews or divesting from corporations that do business in Israel. Presbyterians believe in freedom of conscience and the authority of the Word of God, not the opinion of the preacher. For what it's worth, I will tell you that I do not support proselytizing Jews. For what it's worth, I disagree with the decision to divest from corporations doing business in Israel. I will be glad to tell you in the parlor the reasons for my personal opinions, but I want you to make up your own minds about these matters. I want to help you by giving you some historical, theological, and Biblical background that will, I hope, be useful as you do the important work of discernment.

This work has never been easy work. The relationship between Judaism and Christianity has perpetually perplexed the church. That puzzling little line we say in the Apostles' Creed, "he descended into hell," was originally intended to indicate that Jesus had entered into the deepest darkness of human experience. In other words, that there is no place that we can go that God in Christ has not been before us. But over the centuries, it has come to mean something else. It came to be understood that during the three days Jesus was in hell, he was able to save those who died before he was born, specifically the prophets- Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, and the patriarchs- Moses, Abraham and others. Having lived before Jesus was born; they could not have heard the gospel and were therefore doomed for eternity. "The harrowing of hell," it was called in theology, meaning that Jesus went to hell to save the Jews who had not known him. (1)

Over the centuries, life for Jews has been made hell on earth by crusades, pogroms, persecutions, and genocides, most recently by the extermination of six million Jews in the Holocaust. Across the centuries, the Christian church has not only failed to protest and protect; the church itself often served as perpetrator of indescribable cruelties and injustices.

American society and the American church have been less prone to anti-Semitic acts and sentiments than other societies and churches, but anti-Semitism lingers here in subtle and not so subtle ways. Several years ago, I was working with a friend who is Jewish on a community project. We had a meeting in her home on the northside. As she was seeing her guests to the door after the meeting, I started down the front porch steps and noticed a dark, oddly shaped patch of grass in her otherwise green and beautiful front yard. "Your grass is dying," I said.

My friend replied, "Acid will do that. Look closer." When I did, I saw that a swastika had been burned in the grass of my friend's front yard.

Here's a question. What is the relationship God intends between Jews and Christians? (2) One of the most helpful statements ever made by a Christian church was made by our denomination in 1987 and commended for study and reflection. It says that the "living God whom Christians worship is exactly the same God who is worshiped and served by Jews. We bear witness that the God revealed in Jesus, A Jew, to be the triune Lord of all is the same God disclosed in the life and worship of Israel," Israel being used in reference to the ancient Hebrews, not the modern state of Israel.

Christians must remember that Jesus was a Jew. He understood himself to be so. He died with the words of a Psalm from the Hebrew Scriptures on his lips, "My God, my God, why hast thou

forsaken me?” (Psalm 22) Christianity began within the context of Judaism. Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, called himself “a Hebrew among the Hebrews.” If you read the letters of Paul, you will see that the great controversy surrounding Paul’s mission work was whether the Gentiles had to be circumcised, circumcision being the sign of the covenant God had made with Abraham, or whether they could become Christians without being circumcised. Paul believed that circumcision was not necessary for Gentiles to become Christians.

Of course, the deeper, underlying conflict in the early years of the Christian movement was between those who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, the one for whom the Jewish people had waited, and those who saw Jesus as one among the prophets, rather than the Messiah whom the prophets had foretold. Was Jesus the Messiah or not? This was the question. Herein lay the great divide which broke the bonds between the two faiths. And yet, not all bonds were broken. There are still strong ties that Jews share with Christians and Christians share with Jews that they do not share with adherents of other faith traditions. We believe in the same God. We are monotheists. The Jews were the first monotheists: “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” (Deuteronomy 6:4) To claim that the God revealed in Jesus Christ is different from the God in the Old Testament is to be no longer monotheistic. We cannot be Christians and say that the God of the Old Testament was replaced by the God of the New Testament.

Sometime in the second century a view called “supersessionism” began to take shape. (3) This taught that Christians had replaced the Jews as God’s chosen people. That position has been declared a false teaching. Why? Because there can only be one God. Why? Because we believe that God is a promise-keeper and not a promise-breaker. Our reading from Genesis speaks of how the Lord appeared to Abram and said, “I am the Lord, God Almighty. I will make my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant.” This is what the Bible says.

The Bible also teaches, as Paul’s complex theology in the Letter to the Romans expresses it, that the church, which consists of those baptized into Christ, has been engrafted by God’s grace into the story of redemption. Christianity did not invent or initiate the story of redemption. God initiated it. God began that story with the Hebrew people. In God’s wisdom, Israel was elected. In Christ, the whole world is invited into God’s grace. Can it be explained so that you can clearly understand it? I don’t think so. Even Paul, after anguishing about it for two or three chapters in Romans, had to throw up his hand and say at the end, “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and inscrutable ways!” God is a mystery, but this much we know: God chose a particular people as a sign of God’s grace. In Christ, that grace becomes fully released into the world, demonstrating that God’s purpose of redemption embraces the whole creation.

I know this has been heavy going this morning. What do we need to do as Christians, as Presbyterians now? I just don’t think we can be Christian and fail to acknowledge the need for repentance in the Church’s long complicity in anti-Jewish acts and attitudes across the centuries. (4) We are heirs to a great legacy as Christians, but we are also heirs to a dark legacy. We who are bearers of the faith in our time and place will want to confirm the continuity of God’s promise to the Hebrew people and to offer to our Jewish friends, always, the deepest respect for their faith tradition.

We will want to look for ways that we can live out together our common calling to serve God's great purposes of justice and fairness and move toward the high moral ground which Judaism has always called for. Some of the closest relationships I have had over my years in the ministry in Atlanta, the allies I could always count on, were not always my Christian colleagues, but always my Jewish friends: Rabbi Arnold Goodman and Rabbi Alvin Sugarman. When the Olympic Park bombing took place, the call came out from Rabbi Sugarman that we all get together and see how we could hold Atlanta together in 1996. On the terrible day of 9/11, I went back to my house in the late afternoon. The first message on the answering machine was from Rabbi Goodman saying, "Joanna, we must come together. I'm calling our friend Plemon El Amin." Plemon is a wonderful Muslim imam and leader in our city. Out of that conversation came the interfaith service that was Atlanta's response to 9/11. That's what I mean by the high moral ground.

None of this is to say there are not deep moral issues involved in Israeli/Palestine situation. One year ago, I was in Palestine. I spent three days on the West Bank. I cannot tell you how ugly and terrible the separation barrier is. It looked more like a wall to me. It snakes its way through Palestinian territory and in many places is built on land owned by Palestinians. It separates the Palestinians from their work and makes life almost impossible for them I can also tell you that in recent months, the number of suicide bombers and terrorist attacks has dropped dramatically.

There is plenty of blame to go around on all sides in this conflict-racked situation. I will say that the divestment decision notwithstanding, our Presbyterian church has consistently affirmed Israel's right to exist as a nation-state even as it has advocated for the rights of the dispossessed Palestinians. I have no control over the Palestinians or the Israel government, but one of my greatest concerns has to do with rise of Christian Zionism, which sees the formation of Israel as a sign of the end of times which will bring about the last judgment of conflagration which only Christians will survive. (5) I am frightened of Christian Zionism.

I believe that people in both Palestine and Israel have a right to a homeland where they can live safely and peacefully in borders that are recognized by all. (6) I believe it will take unprecedented energy, forgiveness, trust and imagination to make that happen and to make it last, but I believe it can be done, not through human wisdom alone, but through the wisdom of God, who, as Christ showed us, intends to break down every barrier that separates Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free. (Galatians 3:28)

In 1994, Alvin Sugarman and I took a group of Presbyterians and members of the Temple on a trip to Israel. Forty Christians and Jews had a deeply meaningful experience together. The day we went to the Galilee and to the site traditionally associated with the Sermon on the Mount, I had an upset stomach. Alvin Sugarman stood on the side of the hill and led our group, reading Jesus' mighty words:

"Blessed are they who were persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God."

On the day that we went to Yad Vashem, the memorial to the Holocaust, Alvin was not feeling well. At the end of that visit, we closed with the worship service traditionally led by a rabbi. They had to make do with me. I told a story about a rabbi who was asked one day by his students how to tell when night was over and a new morning had dawned. The rabbi said, "What do you think?"

One student answered, "Is it when you hear the rooster crow?"

Another asked, "Is it when you can discern the silhouette of the tree against the horizon?"

"No," the rabbi replied. "It is when you can look into the face of a stranger and see him as your brother, when you can see the one who is different from you as your sister. Then you will know that the night is over and a new day has come."

In the name of the Creator, and the Redeemer and the Sustainer, Amen.

(1) Polley, Max E. ,*God's Universal Grace*.

(2) *A Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jew*, the 199<sup>th</sup> General assembly (1987) Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

(3) Ibid.

(4) Ibid.

(5) Ibid.

(6) From a statement adopted by the Session of Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago.