

WGUMC January 10, 2016 "Jesus for Jews"
Matthew 5:17-20

Joke told by my husband:

Centuries ago, the pope decreed that Jews in Italy had to convert or leave. There was an outcry from the Jewish community, so the pope offered a deal: He would have a religious debate with the leader of the Jewish community. If the Jews won, they could stay in Italy. If the pope won, they would have to convert or leave.

The Jewish people picked an aged, wise rabbi to represent them in the debate. However, as the rabbi spoke no Italian, and the pope spoke no Yiddish, they agreed that it would be a 'silent' debate.

On the chosen day the pope and rabbi sat opposite each other. The pope raised three fingers. The rabbi looked back and raised one finger. Next, the pope waved his finger around his head. The rabbi pointed to the ground where he sat. The pope brought out a communion wafer and a chalice of wine. The rabbi pulled out an apple. With that the pope stood and declared that he was beaten. The rabbi was too clever. The Jews could stay.

Later the cardinals met with the pope and asked him what had happened. The pope said, "First I held up three fingers to represent the Trinity. He responded by holding up one finger to remind me there is still only one God common to both our beliefs. Then, I waved my finger around my head to show him that God was all around us. He responded by pointing to the ground to show that God was also right here with us. I pulled out the wine and wafer, to show that God absolves us of all our sins. He pulled out an apple to remind me of the original sin. He had beaten me at every move and I could not continue."

Meanwhile, the Jewish community gathered to ask the rabbi how he had won. "I haven't a clue," said the rabbi. "First,

he said to me that we had three days to get out of Italy, so I gave him the finger. Then he tells me that the whole country would be cleared of Jews and I said to him that we were staying right here.” “And then what?” asked a woman. “Who knows?” said the Rabbi. “He took out his lunch, so I took out mine.”

I thought you might like that joke, but I have to say that the relationship between the Jewish and Christian communities hasn't really been a laughing matter, starting way back in the New Testament, when some Jews followed Jesus and others didn't. And though there was considerable movement back and forth between synagogue and church probably for several centuries, by the time of The Crusades, the persecution of Jews by Christians was commonplace.

After all, Jews were called "Christ killers," and we made them carry that cross all the way to the Holocaust. So in the aftermath of WWII, Christians had some serious soul-searching to do. How had the Church helped to create the conditions that allowed a hatred of Jews to become a genocide?

When John Paul II called into session the Second Vatican

Council, the Roman Catholic Church issued a declaration that laid out the evolving relationship of the Church to other world religions. The Church wanted to speak very clearly about the spiritual ties that bind Christians and Jews, and in that document, it proclaimed that "God holds the Jews most dear...He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues...[And] what happened in [Christ's] passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today...the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God...Furthermore...the Church...decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone." [from *Nostra Aetate*, issued in October, 1965]

Since 1965, the Church's official teaching has been that "the Jews" as a people were not responsible for the death of Jesus of Nazareth. It only took 1900 years to clarify that truth. "Trust in the slow work of God," Teilhard de Chardin once said.

And, believe me, when it comes to the Church, God's work is even slower!

So there I was right before Christmas, after the attacks in Paris and the shootings in San Bernardino, despairing that the world's religions would ever learn to live together in peace.

Then I got a Facebook message from a college friend of mine who is a pastor back East. He sent me a link to a statement issued by a group of Orthodox Rabbis on the 50th anniversary of Vatican II. The title of their statement is "To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians." I sent him a note, saying, "Thank you. I needed some good news coming from the children of Abraham!"

And so do you, so I'm going to share some of that statement today as we begin to explore what people of other faiths can teach us about Jesus. It is the season of Epiphany, when we celebrate the manifestation of Christ, and we're going to discover what truths about Jesus are made more clear to us,

more manifest to us, when we see them in someone else's faith.

Let's start with Judaism, because Jews are our closest religious relatives and because if we don't know something about their faith, we don't know something fundamental about Jesus. Contrary to popular belief, Jesus was not the first Christian. He was born, lived and died a Jew.

If you have any doubt about that, just read the Sermon on the Mount, especially the verses we read this morning. Jesus is up on the mountain teaching the crowds and just before he launches into his interpretation of the law, he makes a point to say that he has no intention of invalidating any part of it. Jesus couldn't be more Jewish than when he said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished."

Jesus' strong defense of the law is not lost on our friends,

the Orthodox Rabbis. In their statement, they quote an eighteenth-century rabbi by the name of Jacob Emden, who wrote this: "Jesus brought a double goodness to the world. On the one hand, he strengthened the Torah of Moses majestically...and not one of our Sages spoke out more emphatically concerning the immutability of the Torah. On the other hand, he removed idols from the nations and...instilled them firmly with moral traits...Christians are congregations that work for the sake of heaven who are destined to endure, whose intent is for the sake of heaven and whose reward will not be denied."

The rabbis' statement goes on to say, "Now that the Catholic Church has acknowledged the eternal Covenant between G-d and Israel, we Jews can acknowledge the ongoing constructive validity of Christianity as our partner in world redemption...As stated by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel's Bilateral Commission with the Holy See [the Vatican]...'We are

no longer enemies, but unequivocal partners in articulating the essential moral values for the survival and welfare of humanity.' Neither of us can achieve G-d's mission in this world alone."

Signed by over 50 Orthodox Rabbis from 14 different countries, this statement is a stirring call to both Jews and Christians to work together with our One God to redeem the world. After 50 long years of interreligious dialogue, I pray that we will not just keep talking about it, but actually do it.

Yet beyond issuing the call to work together for the common good, what do the rabbis teach us about Jesus? Above all, they remind us of his Jewishness and of his very Jewish view of God. What I mean by that is that the God who was at work in Jesus is a God who is intimately connected to THIS life and utterly committed to the redemption of THIS world.

Jews are this-worldly, and not in a bad way. Too often Christians have had a pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by kind of attitude

about this world: Why bother trying to improve it, when we are just going to leave it? Why worry about THIS life when we should be more concerned about the NEXT ONE? But Jesus is focused on bringing the kingdom of heaven down to earth: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done ON EARTH as it is in heaven."

Ever wonder why Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead? If all he cared about were heaven, he could have just let Lazarus go there. But no! He brought Lazarus back to THIS world, so that the people in THIS world might see the love and live the life of God.

Our Jewish Jesus is not going to let us forget that holy living in the here and now matters to God. We Protestants have to resist the temptation to think that we can live any way we want to knowing that, just as long as we throw ourselves on the mercy of Jesus before we die, he will give us a pass to get into heaven.

While Jesus is always ready to forgive, he didn't come here to give out golden passes. Hence the rest of the passage from this morning: "Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

Jews teach us that Jesus is no slouch when it comes to holy living. Our Jewish Jesus is challenging. He is always calling us out for making excuses for not living up to the love of God. Of course, we complain that there is no way we could ever, on our own, fulfill the Law. And that is very true. But the point is that Jesus came and did fulfill it, and by his grace and mercy, those who follow him can, too. So let me summarize Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount this way: God has given

you one precious life. What are you going to do with it? You may not know it, but you are a partner in God's redemption of the world. What are you going to do about your little corner of it?

That's the question I put to you at the start of 2016. Take a look at your New Year's Resolutions. Is world redemption on your list? Why not? You can start by repairing relationships. Ever heard of *Tikkun Olam*? It's a Hebrew expression meaning, "the repair of the world." We have a whole year ahead of us. We have time to repair what is broken inside us and what is in ruin around us, and if we—both Jews and Christians—would let God help us do just that, then we are nothing less than God's partners in the redemption of the world. I'll close with another better-known Hebrew expression: Amen.