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*Let the Scales Fall from Our Eyes*

Last Saturday, the Chabad of Poway was attacked, and one person was killed and several others injured. This is closer to home than you may realize, as one of my wife's coworkers' mother was in Chabad at the time. We are all one degree of separation from this tragedy. The one person who died, Lori Gilbert-Kaye, was killed for being an observant Jew, worshipping God in the way she knew.

Her murderer was a self-proclaimed Christian, who was a regular church goer. In a manifesto, the murderer explained his reasons for his actions with theological foundations. He believed that Jews killed Jesus, and combined with other anti-Semitic beliefs he held, that feels killing Jews would lead to the glory of God. My stomach is turning as I say these words to you. Combine two thousand years of bad theology with the abilities of modern fire arms, and you have a potent mix of hate and violence that we've seen play out too many times. In an article in the Washington Post, the pastor of the murderer's church said that he read the manifesto. To quote him: "It certainly calls for a good amount of soul-searching. We can't pretend as though we didn't have some responsibility for him — he was radicalized into white nationalism from within the very midst of our church."

I want to be clear, neither the shooter's family nor church has to answer for his hate crimes. But the wider church, including us, does need to look deep within ourselves and our tradition for why someone could hear the good news of Christ proclaimed and then take that as a call for violence. The deeply unfortunate part is that we don't have to look too far to find the reasons. Before I begin in earnest, I need to tell you that I'm going to try to condense two thousand years of history and awful theology, and still end on a note of hope and love. I will

gloss over some things, but I want to assure you that if you're at all interested in talking about these subjects more, my door and my book shelf are always open.

As all of you remember, we just got out of Lent and Holy Week. On Palm Sunday and on Good Friday we read the passion narrative of Jesus' death. It repeatedly points a finger to the Jews of Jerusalem for Jesus' death, and as Lindsey and Brenda and I have all explained, that simply isn't the case. Jews of Jerusalem did not kill Jesus, the Roman Empire did. Crucifixion was an imperial punishment for crimes of sedition against the Empire and Caesar, and Pontius Pilate was well known for his brutality towards the slightest whiff of what he deemed disorder. Religious leaders of the day did aid in this process, but no crowds would have been involved, it would have been the political and religious elites calling for the death of Jesus. Public opinion of a backwater region of the Empire wasn't a concern for any Roman governor.

Why then do the gospels give us a very different story as it relates to the death of Jesus? As followers of Jesus began to crop up in synagogues in those earliest days, there were a lot of Gentiles who became interested in this Jesus fellow. The reason that Gentiles were interested in the first place was because Judaism, while somewhat obscure to the average Greek and Roman, was nonetheless fascinating in its complete oddity. Most religions at that time were polytheistic, but this one strange people group worshipped one God, and made sacrifices at only one temple in the comparatively small city of Jerusalem. They were weird, but interesting. For elite Roman Stoics in particular, who were all about discipline and masculinity, the laws around the use of the body in Judaism were of particular interest. They revered the prescribed bodily discipline of much of Jewish law, and as such, this exotic religion was seen as having some ancient wisdom that conformed well to Stoicism.

Now, this didn't stop the Hebrew people from being a complete pain in the side for the Empire. They were considered rowdy and restless, but Rome had bigger concerns, like trade and war with Persia, than fretting over Palestine. So the Romans gave the Jewish people some concessions to keep them quiet. There were several, but there was one that was extremely important. Jews didn't have to participate in the imperial cult that worshipped Caesar. Instead, Emperor Augustus paid for twice daily sacrifices at the Jewish Temple in the honor of the Emperor in perpetuity. This in effect covered the sacrifices that would have had to been made communally rather than individually, in the holiest place of the Hebrew people, as a sign of loyalty to the Emperor.

After Jesus was killed for being a rabble rousing rebel, his followers still went to the synagogue, as they were Jews in good standing regardless of the Empire. When their message was heard by more and more Gentiles who were familiar with Jewish practice, they became more attracted to synagogue culture. Over the course of time, the stories of Jesus were eventually written down, the Gospel of Mark being the earliest, around 66CE, John being the latest, closer to 85 and 95CE. Now, it doesn't do a lot of good to tell a wealthy, potential Roman convert that it was their Empire that was the cause of Jesus' death. Now you start to get the picture, the story was modified over those 30-65 years after Jesus' death to bring non-Jews closer to following "the way," as we here it referred to in today's reading from Acts.

And that brings us to another extremely important point in all this: there was no "Christianity" as entirely separate from Judaism until the time of the Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity in 312CE. Followers of Jesus, up until that point, worshipped as a subset of their synagogues in private homes. Constantine's conversion gave us the first public

houses of worship for Christians, as he made the formerly obscure sect of a strange religion the official belief system of the Roman state.

And this is where sinister anti-Judaism really rears its ugly head. Because Christians had been shunned from synagogues by and large, revenge gripped those who had always harbored ill will towards Jewish people. It's at this time that we get many of the earliest anti-Jewish writings of the church from such renowned preachers and authors such as St. John Chrysostom and Justin Martyr. It's an oversimplification to say that this is the point in history in which the Church trades in Jesus for Caesar, but it's not too far from the truth. Railing against Jews was common past time of Christian clergy at the time, and even St. Augustine of Hippo, who famously protected the Jews of Rome, still said hateful and awful things about this begrudged people.

Skipping nearly 1200 years and too many atrocities against Jews to count, we arrive at Martin Luther. Martin Luther is best remembered by the church for taking on the worst aspects of Roman Catholic Church of his time, but what often goes unmentioned in the soaring rhetoric about him is that he was a virulent anti-Semite who became more wrathful with age.

Unfortunately, he was never alone in his horrid outlook. I won't repeat today the awful things he wrote about Jews, but suffice it to say that those writings paved the way for Nazi Germany to engage in the horrors of the Holocaust 450 years later. That is not an oversimplification.

The key for much of our anti-Jewish thought in the Christian tradition comes down to our understanding of the Apostle Paul, whose conversion we read about in our reading from Acts today. In particular, Luther's understanding or misunderstanding of Paul, has led to what we call replacement theology, or supersessionism. This is a theology which claims that God's covenant with Israel ended when Jesus died, and that the Christian church is the new people of Israel. In other words, the church supersedes the Hebrew people. I want to be clear: this is wrong, hurtful

and abhorrent theology. It is not of Christ or God, and we as the wider church need to prayerfully repent of it. If our vision of God's love can't extend beyond our own understanding, it isn't Christian at all.

Jesus lived and died as Jew, his ministry was in and among Jews, and his identity was entirely Jewish. Jesus' first followers were Jewish, and they maintained a connection to Judaism. The Apostle Paul was Jewish, became a believer in Christ, and opened the door to non-Jews for a relationship with God through Jesus. Our misunderstandings of Paul are rooted in the idea that his faith in Jesus superseded his Jewish identity. It never did, rather it complemented an understanding of covenant with God Israel and extended an invitation to grace out of that blessing of the Torah.

Take our reading from today for example: his transformational experience with the Risen Christ is a mirror of how God calls prophets throughout Hebrew Scripture.<sup>1</sup> Everything that happens to Jesus, the Apostles, and Paul comes in some form from Hebrew Scripture. How can we say that Judaism is somehow a relic of the past when it is a living and breathing foundation for Jesus and all of our tradition? I think today's reading about Saul is more a lesson for us the church than it is a history lesson of our traditions persecution. The lesson for us is that we ought not be like Saul, persecuting those we don't understand. We need to let the scales of anti-Judaism and hate fall from our eyes so that we can embrace our siblings of faith, and stop persecuting those whose blessing we share with God.

My hope for us is that we like Saul allow ourselves to fall down before the glowing and brilliant truth, hurtful as that truth can be. My hope for us is that we like Saul are willing to listen

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<sup>1</sup> The flash of light is taken from the 4<sup>th</sup> book of Maccabees (4.10), the falling to the ground is taken from the books of Ezekiel (1.28) and Daniel (10.9), the double naming "Saul, Saul!" happens to Abraham in Genesis (22.11), Moses in Exodus (3.4), and Samuel in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel (3.4, 10), and his commissioning is reminiscent of Abraham's in Genesis (12.1; 22.2).

to what Jesus has to say to us, and draw back from hate and violence and then live as he would have us live. My hope for us is that the scales fall from our eyes and we behold the complex truth that Jesus lived not so that we could overcome what was ancient and true, but that we could live it in a different way because God also calls us non-Jewish people to the same love and respect for our fellow humans as God does throughout all of Hebrew Scripture. My hope for us is that we discard the theologies of violence from our past and grow something new, vibrant and life-giving now and in the future. My hope for us is that we see the resurrection and Easter not as replacing one relationship with another, but as the opportunity to live the mercy, kindness, love, and joy of God that Jesus knew personally and offers to us. Amen.