

Children of a Lesser God?  
Yom Hashoah Sunday  
April 14, 2007  
Eastertide #1  
Acts 5:27-32

I tell jokes for the weeks between Easter and Pentecost to remind my congregation that we celebrate and learn from the lessons of resurrection for a season, not just one day. Thus, the jokes introduce Yom Hashoah sermon. Because I begin with the first story as a humorous introduction to the topic, I think that this works and isn't disrespectful.

Jokes for Eastertide: Children in Church

3 year old Reese prayed "Our Father, who does art in heaven, Harold is his name."

A little boy was overheard praying "Lord, if you can't make me a better boy, don't worry about it. I'm having a real good time like I am."

After the baptism of his baby brother in church, Jason sobbed all the way home in the back seat of the car. His father asked him three times what was wrong. Finally, the boy replied, "That preacher said he wanted us brought up in a Christian home, and I want to stay with you guys."

A four-year-old prayed "Forgive us our trash baskets as we forgive those who put trash in our baskets."

[Last one for today] A Sunday School teacher asked her students "Why is it necessary to be quiet in church?" One bright little girl said "Because people are sleeping."

[Prayer here.]

I live in Pikesville. My gym is in Pikesville. Most of you all know this, but for the few who don't, Pikesville is considered to be the Jewish part of town. Although my neighborhood doesn't reflect this demographic, my gym certainly does- lots of Jewish folk there. My peeps, my friends from the gym, are all Jewish. Only marginally religious Jews, but culturally very Jewish. On Good Friday I attended my regular Friday afternoon yoga class at my gym. After class I told my friend, Lisa, that I couldn't stay to chat because I had a service to lead. Now- I have a lot of Lisas in my life. My best friend is named Lisa. There's Lisa from this church. So when this third Lisa cropped up in my life I needed to differentiate her from the other two Lisa's so this Lisa became known as "crazy Lisa from the gym." I call her Crazy Lisa from the Gym because she is crazy. She has so much energy, it's painful. She is very smart and creative, but she totally has ADD so in her conversations she often switches topics in a heartbeat. By the way, don't feel bad for my friend because I call her Crazy Lisa from the Gym. She calls me "Bethminster." It's a take on Westminster, of course, but mainly she calls me Bethminster because my name is Beth and I'm a minister. Lisa knows 98% of everyone who goes to the gym and she's introduced me to a good portion of these total strangers as "Bethminster" without explanation. She has well earned her Crazy Lisa from the Gym moniker.

So on Good Friday when I told Crazy Lisa from the Gym that I couldn't stay to chat because I have a service to lead, she immediately became very respectful and said "Oh that's right! Happy Good Friday." My three friends from the gym are incredibly, impressively considerate about the whole I'm a Christian and not only am I a Christian but a Christian minister thing. These folks certainly know other Christians, but they're pretty deeply entrenched in Jewish culture. These three friends are definitely somewhat unaccustomed to a female, progressive, Christian minister who talks about gay people all the time. So it's a very interesting dynamic. When Crazy Lisa from the Gym said cheerfully, but seriously "Happy Good Friday," I thought about my options for a second, then I said "Thank you, but you know, Good Friday isn't like a rah-rah happy holiday. It's a pretty solemn day." I was trying to say "It's a solemn holiday like Yom Kippur," the Jewish Day of Atonement. In a few ways Yom Kippur and Good Friday have similar themes so I thought that it would have been a good thing to say. Trouble was, right at that moment, I faltered because I was afraid I was going to reverse Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) with Rosh Hoshanah (Jewish New Year) so I chickened out. But that's OK because Crazy Lisa from the Gym always has something to say, so she replied "Oh, like it's an oxymoron." I replied with excitement "Yes! That's kind of it. Our whole faith is built on this paradox." I was very excited because I thought that Lisa made this stellar realization about Christianity. Crazy Lisa from the Gym being smart and witty and ADD and never able to accept a compliment or let the subject stay serious too long quickly replied "Oh! A paradox like that South Park episode about the Easter bunny." Oivey! So much for my successful interfaith dialogue.

Mark Pickett was my colleague in Durham, North Carolina. Mark and his wife, Margot, were co-pastors at a little O&A church called Pilgrim UCC. I like Mark's style a great deal. He's pretty introverted for the most part, but when Mark went on a trip to Germany about four years ago, he made up his mind to be a one person witness that not all Americans support George W. Bush, the way that our nation is fighting the war against terrorism, and most of all- that not all Americans support the war in Viet Nam. I mean, Iraq. Margot told me that everywhere they went on that trip, Mark initiated conversations with whomever to proclaim this message of "not all Americans agree with Bush." He was a little evangelist to spread the new gospel abroad.

I have a great deal of Mark's self-appointed evangelical fervor in me about three or four issues. Wherever I go, I confront racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia whenever I'm able. I also try to demonstrate to the world that not all Christians are intolerant, self-interested, elitist jerks. I do my best to be a self-appointed ambassador to make race relations better in all social interactions whether in the grocery store or in a fender bender to show that my faith cohered with God's vision of equality. Finally (this might be ineptly phrased) I'm on some sort of mission to demonstrate significant solidarity as a Christian to Jews. It's central to my understanding of faith that the relationship between Jews and Christians needs reconciliation.

I've been trying to find a way to explain that idea better and here's my best description (and of course it's a story): I grew up in a crazy homogeneous environment. My corner of Davidson County was overwhelmingly white and protestant. In my Southern Baptist influenced mind the biggest distinction that existed in my high school was the difference between those of us who were saved and those who weren't. My high school maybe had seven African-Americans in a school of over 800 students. We had no Asians, no Jews to my knowledge, no Moslems. I can remember four students who were members of the Latter Day Saints and one family who was Catholic. I grew up thinking that there was a pretty big difference between Baptists and Methodists because our differences in the way in which we were physically baptized.

I went to a large public university and became acquainted with the wonderful world of diversity. However, my path first opened to Jews when I became a counselor at a summer-long residential camp in Wayne County, which is upper north east Pennsylvania, right across the state line from Hancock, New York. Most of my campers and most of the counselors were secular Jews. We had a reflective time on Friday evening for Shabbot, but no actual service. The kitchen made the best food in the world, but they didn't keep kosher. In fact my campers' favorite dish, besides chocolate pudding, was ribs. One night the campers in the bunk adjacent to mine were awake when it was my watch. When I came onto their side to try to shush them, it took a while to get them to stop talking because they were deeply and seriously engaged in a conversation about the Holocaust. Eight year olds were talking about the Holocaust. A camper named Lauren described the janitor in their temple who was a Holocaust survivor. She spoke about this adult in her world with huge, reverential eyes. Other children spoke about the family members they lost or friends of their parents who had lost family in the Holocaust. With this conversation I realized that Jewish children enter a world, a post World War II world and post-Holocaust world that is completely different than my own.

The next semester at school I took probably the best course that Carolina offered- Introduction to Judaic Civilization taught by David J. Halperin. Professor Halperin gave us these very specific study guides that we were to complete on our own outside of class. During class we didn't do anything but have discussion. Professor Halperin also made us do the most important thing anyone could have decided (especially for one who eventually entered Divinity School), he made us learn time lines. Just like Becky has on the wall in the conference room, Professor Halperin made us fill in dates on a line. His exams were pages long with lots of fill in the blank. He allowed us a cheat sheet for his exams, including his final. People filled those cards to the brim with microscopic handwriting because his course required detailed knowledge. He also required two papers that semester. Professor Halperin filled up my brain with knowledge that I use on a day to day basis in work and in listening to the news.

Most of all, not only did David Halperin fill up my brain, he filled up my heart. He won the teaching award twice at Carolina. Students loved him. He inspired us to study and work hard. I heard that the Department of Religious Studies frowned on him a little because he didn't produce enough scholarly work. I don't know if that was true or not, but if it was true, it's because he was so invested in actual teaching. I took Professor Halperin again the next semester in this insanely hard religious studies/graduate level class mainly because I wanted to learn from him. Although I haven't been in touch with him in a few years, Professor Halperin is one of my two professors in my twenty-eight year education whose influence affects me on a daily basis. He's part of my heart and he'll always be part of my heart. I love him. I admire him. I am a better and smarter person because I know him.

Some folks say that all politics are local. In my opinion all politics are personal. My intersection between faith and politics is very, very personal. When I think about Crazy Lisa from the Gym, when I think about those children at camp, when I think about Professor Halperin who I admire and love and revere, the Holocaust becomes very personal. The interfaith dialogue between Christians and Jews becomes very personal. The way that I preach, the way that I proclaim our Good News, is directly influenced by the measure of love that I hold for these people and those for whom they stand. For you see, my brothers and sisters in Christ, Christians let Jews down in a profoundly tragic and consequential way in the years before and during World War II. One sermon is not big enough for everything so I'm omitting important things like the history of Christian anti-Semitism and how the Bible has been used as fuel for anti-Semitism. Today, and most days, it's just enough to face the facts- the majority of German Christians and other European Christians who faced the Nazi government were either active perpetrators or complicit in their silence of anti-Semitism and their support of all of the machinations which led to at least six million Jews killed in the Holocaust. Certainly other groups such as homosexuals, the Roma (gypsies), Jehovah's Witnesses, political dissenters, and the mentally retarded perished as well, but today we're right in allowing ourselves to concentrate on the more than six million Jews, the largest single group by far, to die in the Holocaust. Many others died in the war. Poland lost a huge amount of Jews and non-Jews alike, but the Nazi party's reprehensible singling out of persecution of the Jews is the main thing for which we are accountable today.

Rabbi Irving Greenberg set the appropriate bar for the intersection of theology and the Holocaust. He said:

**Judaism and Christianity do not merely tell of God's love for humanity. They stand or fall on their fundamental claim that the human being is of ultimate and absolute value. The Holocaust poses the most radical counter-testimony to both Judaism and Christianity. No statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children.**

We cannot undo the atrocities of the past, but we can remember. We can learn. We can live wiser because of that which happened and of that which failed to happen. We can act. We can intervene. We can care more and do more.

Buoyed by the confidence and fervor of the resurrection, the disciples proclaimed Jesus Christ crucified and risen. They made this bold proclamation in public. Even though the civil authorities sought to silence them, the disciples said "We must obey God rather than any human authority." That's kind of it, my brothers and sisters in Christ. Either we worship God or we acquiesce to lesser gods or lesser ideas or lesser principles or lesser politics or lesser loves or lesser ethics.

Sometimes the Gospel is good news that fits easily into our understanding of the world and understanding of our place in the world. Sometimes God's good news flies directly in the face of our self-interest. Today's theological principle is straightforward, clear, and terribly inconvenient. We have to die as a martyr if we're ever faced with a situation in which we have to choose between God's authority or a human authority that forces us to do something awful.

There are these terrible stories about soldiers in Uganda who recruit children to be soldiers. Their initiation into the army is the choice "You can kill this other child or you can be killed." Shoot or be shot. For the Christian of conscience, if we're ever in that situation, our option is clear. Take the bullet. In Nazi Germany, Christians had to make a choice between staying silent and staying alive or speaking up and dying. "We must obey God rather than any human authority." That's it. That's the call. That's the mandate. That's the hard, hard truth.

If somebody put me in a situation where there was one gun and one bullet and they locked me into a room with David Halperin and they said "shoot or be shot," I have no doubt that all instincts of self-preservation would kick in. I would like to think that I could take the bullet, but I don't know. What I do know is that while I'm not facing that choice, I have to train myself in the Christian principles and practices and disciplines that would make that choice crystal clear if ever it became a reality. So, that's what I'm doing today. I'm preaching in such a way so that we are theologically trained to know that God's authority must be obeyed and that God's authority is always and forever rightly ordered above any human authority, even if it means that we lose our lives or lose our freedom or lose our possessions.

Do average Americans have blood on our hands? My German-American professor of theology, Fred Herzog, told us in class "Six million children die each year due to preventable causes. That's a Holocaust every year." Well, that was a decade ago when Fred proclaimed that truth. That was a decade ago before AIDS redefined the definition of crisis. In Bono's address at the National Prayer Breakfast in

2006, he said:

**6,500 Africans are still dying every day of a preventable, treatable disease, for lack of drugs we can buy at any drugstore. This is not about charity; this is about justice and equality.**

**Because there's no way we can look at what's happening in Africa and, if we're honest, conclude that deep down, we really accept that Africans are equal to us. Anywhere else in the world, we wouldn't accept it. Look at what happened in Southeast Asia with the tsunami. 150,000 lost lives to that misnomer of all misnomers, "mother nature." In Africa 150,000 lives are lost every month. A tsunami every month, and it's a completely avoidable catastrophe.**

Rwanda is a mostly Christian nation. The 1994 genocide, largely ignored by the world, began on April 6... the week following Easter. Hundred of thousands of ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed. So much for never again. Yesterday NPR's Scott Simon said that interested parties can go to the National Holocaust website and see satellite footage of the exterminations currently happening in Darfur, Sudan. We can literally watch genocide happen, but can't stop it from happening. What's our excuse?

My brothers and sisters in Christ, what we proclaim in the name of Jesus matters. What we do in the name of Jesus matters. What we fail to do in the name of Jesus might matter the most.

May God help us all. Amen.