

The Holocaust: A Challenge to Christianity

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Thomas C. Davis, III, Ph.D.

At Hanover St. Presbyterian Church

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Texts:

John 9: 13-22

Romans 11: 1-2, 13-18

1 John 2: 7-11

Since this morning's play moved me to preach on the theme of the Holocaust, let me begin by noting that the Holocaust was a huge theological challenge to Jews and Christians alike. How could a loving God permit the slaughter of some six million men, women, and children? Either there must no God after all, some concluded, or else God must be dead. As both Jewish and Christian scholars were wrestling with the perennial problem of evil now magnified to the nth degree, an even more troubling one arose for Christian scholars: How could Christians have stood by and let the Nazis proceed with their "final solution"? Some Christians did, in fact, resist, but they were vastly in the minority. Why did most Christians discount the early rumors of Nazi atrocities? Why did many German Christians, who had at least an inkling of what was going on in the death camps, turn a blind eye to the plight of their Jewish compatriots?

Right after the war ended, the too facile answer to such questions was that Hitler had just been too clever and ruthless. He was a monster, an historical fluke. In other words, he and his fiendish Nazi cohorts were responsible for the Holocaust. However, it wasn't long until some scholars proclaimed this explanation superficial; and worse, a whitewash. True, Hitler did order the "final solution." Legally, he was responsible. But historically this verdict was specious, for if Hitler hadn't, someone else in Europe likely would have. The vicious anti-Semitism of the Nazis was simply the logical outcome of centuries of mounting hostility toward Jews, hostility which began with Christians and was principally fomented by them.

As briefly as possible, let me fill you in on this sad and shameful history.

Jesus did not start the Christian church. His followers, who believed he would prove to be the Messiah, the liberator of Israel, did. When he was crucified as a common criminal their hopes were dashed. But then, something marvelous and mysterious happened. The church calls it resurrection. His disciples experienced him alive. And his spirit inspired them to keep on keepin' on, healing and preaching as he had.

At first, all the disciples of Jesus were Jewish, and they had no reason to try to convince non-Jews that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Why would non-Jews be interested in that anyway? No, the initial evangelistic effort was to Jews. But not many of them bought the message. "What? Jesus, the Messiah!?" "You must be kidding. He didn't liberate us," most Jews said. "Everything is the same. Can't you see? The Romans still have their boots on our necks. You must be mixed up. The Messiah will be the Terminator!" To which the Jewish followers of Jesus (only later called Christians) said: "No, you don't get it. Jesus willingly died. He could have cleaned house, but he chose instead to give us Jews a second chance. Mind you, he's coming back. And you aint seen nothin' 'till you've seen the Lord at his Second Coming. Watch out! What John said will be coming true: The ax will be laid to the root of the trees, and those that don't bear fruit will be thrown into the fire!"

Well, this didn't impress most of the Jewish mainliners. They had heard it all before, from those kooky Essenes in the desert and others. They refused to accept this way-out interpretation of their prophets. And the more they stuck to the traditional ways of interpreting the Hebrew scriptures, the more frustrated the followers of Jesus became. They couldn't believe the resistance of their conservative Jewish brethren. They were beginning to see it as just plain stubbornness, a moral flaw.

Meanwhile, some non-Jews were hearing about Jesus, and liking what they heard. These were the God-fearers, Gentiles who were Jewish wannabes who hung out around the temple and were given a certain respect by Jews--(the Jewish tradition did allow for this)--but who couldn't make it into the inner circle without being circumcised. A few of Jesus' followers were beginning to turn their interest to these Gentile God-fearers, no doubt because they had been spurned by the traditionalists, that is, the Pharisees, about whom the New Testament speaks frequently and derogatorily.

Gentiles took readily to an idea that was developing among the Jesus followers, namely, that you could get to God through him rather than the law. This idea of a divine personal mediator resembled somewhat the mystery religions with which the Gentiles were already familiar. So, the more the Gentile God-fearers responded favorably to the gospel and the more the majority of Jews resisted it, the more the Jesus-is-Messiah preachers spoke of Gentile believers as the new people of God. It didn't take too long for evangelists to speak of the Jews as people of the old covenant, the abrogated covenant of the carnal law, and of Gentiles as the truly spiritual people, the New Covenant folk.

At first the argument between the conservatives and the Jesus-is-Messiah believers had been about whether Jesus was in fact the Messiah. But now the stakes had been raised. Evangelistic preachers were impugning the spiritual pedigree of mainline Jews, and daring to say that uncircumcised Gentiles, those who believed in Jesus as Messiah, were God's truly favored people, not the Jews. This was too much for the synagogues. They began to flog the Christian heretics and cast them out. What had started as a spirited argument amongst Jews (and Jews are, after all, very used to spirited argument) got

physical and nasty. We see evidence of this in today's reading from John 9 where the blind man who confesses Jesus as his healer is driven out of the synagogue. As long as the argument was about Jesus as Messiah there was room for disagreement, but when the Christians started calling Jews God's displaced people (let alone God murderers, which they were called by the Middle Ages), the fat was in the fire. The Christians had pushed too hard, and the Jews were pushing back. An internecine religious warfare had begun, and Christians were eventually to play out their revenge in spades.

The reading from Romans for today expresses a tolerant Christian viewpoint that might have preserved peace between church and synagogue, namely, the view that the Jews were not a God-forsaking or a God-forsaken people. They are still God's chosen people, the trunk of the olive tree onto which the Gentiles have been grafted. Unfortunately, however, Paul's stress on the futility of the Mosaic law, as contrasted to grace, left no room for continuing to respect Jewish piety. The olive tree metaphor was promising, but it never took hold in the Christian community because it was overshadowed by Paul's polemic against the spiritual effectiveness of observing Torah.

I've tried briefly to describe the theological roots of anti-Semitism, which, as I've indicated, can be traced all the way back to the beginning of the church. Once Christianity became the official religion of the Holy Roman Empire, under Emperor Constantine, anti-Semitism went from bad to worse, and eventually, to horrendous. There is much too much to tell in one sermon, but perhaps some highlights will do.

In 388 C.E. a mob burned a synagogue. The emperor at the time ordered Bishop Ambrose to pay for repairs. The bishop replied in a letter that he had never had the pleasure of burning a synagogue, but would be happy to, in order that "there might not be a place where Christ is denied."

In the Middle Ages most Jews were merchants and money lenders because Christian craft guilds excluded them, and they were not allowed to own either the land or the slaves required for making a living by agriculture. Their occupation as merchants and money lenders, which they had been forced into, earned them the reputation for being mercenary and greedy, a stereotype portrayed by the character Shylock in Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice."

During the plagues a conspiracy theory circulated concerning Jews. Christians said that Jews, along with lepers, had poisoned the wells of Europe with magically cursed bags of excrement and menstrual blood. Pogroms broke out against Jews all over Europe, adding corpses of the slaughtered to those who had died by illness. Paintings and woodcuts of the time portray the Jew as a deformed monster with horns, a tail, and cloven hooves.

Islamic rule in Spain improved the lot of Jews somewhat. The Protestant Reformation, by in large did not. Martin Luther began his ministry with pro-Jewish sentiments, but

when he was unable to convert German Jews he published some of the most virulent anti-Semitic diatribe imaginable in <<The Jews and Their Lies.>> The Nazis later used this literature for their own propaganda. When Alice and I visited the Wolfsonian Museum in Miami, which features a pop culture exhibit of everyday household items from Europe and America of the 1930s, we noticed a German beer stein decorated with anti-Semitic sayings. One of them was by Martin Luther.

Summarizing, the hostility waged by Christians against Jews for almost 2000 years started because Jews would not give in to the Christians' interpretation of Hebrew scripture, would not accept Jesus as Messiah. The more obstinately the Jews resisted, the more strenuously Christians insisted that Jesus was the only way to God, and that the stubborn Jews were God-murderers and children of darkness.

Bringing this too brief historical survey up to the Holocaust, I find it extremely ironic that one of our revered Reformed Confessions, the Declaration of Barmen, a document that protested the Nazis use of Christian theology for fascist purposes, begins by quoting John 14:6: "I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me." Of course, the intent of this citation was to pound home the point that the resisters would obey God rather than the Führer. But how ironic that they picked the very New Testament passage which expresses Christian exclusivity most blatantly, a passage that says, in effect, we Christians are the only holy people! Anti-Semitism derived precisely from such a mentality; and the third Reich was built and maintained by exploiting such a mentality.

History matters a lot. Christians are responsible for the Holocaust not because we were mesmerized or tricked by the madman, Hitler, but rather because an insidious cancer grew in our religion from the very start, the cancer of spiteful rage against those who refused to see things the way we did. Anti-Semitism is the natural outgrowth of a destructive ideological flaw that existed in our tradition from the outset. Therefore, we cannot eradicate it simply by striving to be nice to Jews. We have to rethink what we mean when we make the claim that Jesus is Messiah.

Can Christianity survive such a radical Christological critique? I believe it can, and must. Is it so important that we think of Jesus as the one who will finally bring redemption by apocalyptic violence? (That is the implication of such talk as cutting down trees and throwing them into the fire.) Jesus eschewed that method of saving the world when he went to the cross instead of waging war against his enemies. Why would he choose it a second time around?

Can we not come to realize that apocalyptic thinking derives from the vengeful resentment of oppressed peoples who cannot see any way out of their troubles except through rescue by a super hero? Can we not finally come to recognize that violence

cannot redeem the world? Violence never changes anything finally for the good. It only begets anger and more violence.

Finally, must we think of Jesus as God, so that those who had a hand in his crucifixion become in our minds God-slayers, and children of the Devil? Rather, can we not think of Jesus as a man whose cup simply overflowed with God's spirit, so that looking at him, people saw God through him? "Christ" means "the anointed one." Such a concept of being anointed by Spirit would not preclude our recognizing a powerful presence of holy Spirit in other persons and traditions as well. Such a Christology would make room for respecting the spiritual integrity of those who, rightfully I think, have refused to accept the claim that Jesus is the only way to God.

I'll finish with scripture. It is shocking and, at least at first quite dismaying, to discover that the Apostles who gave us our tradition, sometimes said things, even in our sacred scriptures, which are prejudiced, morally and spiritually hurtful. Christians are blind to most of the anti-Jewish comments in the New Testament, because we don't know the historical background well enough to pick up on them. When a New Testament writer begins to talk about children of darkness, or people being blind, you can pretty much count on him having those stubborn Jews in mind. But knowing something about that history, and reading by the help of holy imagination, even some bigoted texts can be read in a positive way. The letter of 1 John is anti-Semitic. We read in 2:22ff:

"The person who denies that Jesus is the Christ, he is Antichrist; and he is denying the Father as well as the Son, because no one who has the Father can deny the Son. "

But, consider these verses from the same letter:

"Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the dark. But anyone who loves his brother is living in the light and need not be afraid of stumbling; unlike the person who hates his brother and is in the darkness, not knowing where he is going, because it is too dark to see."

This text was meant to apply to the Christian fellowship, to urge Christians to be more loving to Christians. But, what if we read it with a broader purview? For centuries Christians claimed to be in the light, indeed, to be the only people in the light. We resented and hated our Jewish brothers, from whose spiritual bosom we had turned away, or been cast out. The text suggests to me that whether one is in darkness or light has to do with how much one is capable of loving, and that the Christian who cannot make hospitable space for non-Christians in his or her theology, is in spiritual darkness, a most pitiable spiritual darkness.

O God, please do save us, not so much from our presumed enemies, as from our ignorance and hatred. Amen.

