

SERMON – 11/01/09

“CHRISTIANITY & WORLD RELIGIONS: Judaism”

“It’s like a soup kitchen,” he told me... Rabbi Shacktman...

- “If you volunteer at the soup kitchen... and come from time to time... then everyone loves you when you show up!
 - “When you don’t come, you’re missed, sure... but people don’t think any less of you...
 - “Why? Because you’re a volunteer!”
 - That’s what all of the non-Jews in the world are, he explained to me.
- “But if someone makes a commitment to come every day... and then they don’t show up... then people get upset...
 - “Because they made a commitment & went back on it.
 - “But people who never make that commitment (the non-Jews) aren’t any less beloved by God,” the rabbi told me.
 - “Judaism is one of the few Western religions that have an absolutely positive view of those outside the faith.”

Welcome to the mid-way point in our current sermon series entitled, ‘CHRISTIANITY & WORLD RELIGIONS’... today we’ll be examining our Jewish brothers & sisters...

- Just like we’ve done the previous weeks with Hinduism, Buddhism, & Islam... the goal of today’s sermon is not to try and convince you why we’re right and they’re wrong...
- It is my hope that we can better understand where others are coming from... as they live out their faith.
- I hope this leads to a greater sense of peace & cooperation... if even in a very small way...
- Much of my research for this week came from Rev. Adam Hamilton’s study of the same title as our series! (I’m grateful to his scholarship.)

Let's start with some of the basics...

- To begin with, Christianity emerged out of Judaism – so our two faiths share a beginning & history!
- It's also a story about God... and God's relationship with a particular group of people... the Hebrews...
 - It's not a faith that begins with a person... rather, it begins with a "people"!
 - And God chose a Hebrew man named Abraham to embody the blessing!
 - God promised to make of Abraham & his descendants a 'great nation'... so that the REST OF THE WORLD would also be blessed...
 - In return, Abraham & his descendants pledged obedience, trust & faithfulness.
 - After Abraham, Isaac & Jacob... the story continues through Moses... and God's giving of the **Torah** (the law)...
- The TORAH is, for the Hebrew people, the way to a life of harmony with God, the world, and other people...
 - The **Talmud** is the record of the extensive commentary upon and interpretation of the Law...
 - The rest of the plot-line of the Hebrew Scriptures is the story of God's **covenant-keeping** & the people's covenant-breaking!
 - Which, in many ways, is humanity's story... the story of our wandering away from God... only to be taken back by God.

As the essence of Islam was stated in a single sentence ("There is no God but Allah, and Mohammad is his prophet & messenger")... so too can the essence of Judaism be stated in the *Shema*...

- “Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”
(Deuteronomy 6:4-5).
- It has been said by some that the essential focus of Judaism is the Shema put into practice in **moral living**...
 - Judaism is a religion of DOING... of acting & reacting...
 - It is a life of fulfilling the human side of the covenant God made with the Hebrews.
- The secret of Jewish piety, according to Huston Smith in his book *The World's Religions*, consists in seeing the entire world as belonging to God and reflecting God's glory.
 - So there's this double theme running throughout Judaism....
 - That we should enjoy life's goodness...
 - And at the same time, the joy that we share is only enhanced when we share it with God (just like it is when we share it with other people!)...
 - Thus, Jewish law sanctions all the good things in life – eating, marriage, children, nature, etc... while elevating them all to HOLINESS!

Something very significant happened in the year 70CE...

- The Roman government **destroyed the Temple** in Jerusalem... the one that the Jews had rebuilt on returning from their Babylonian exile...
 - Suddenly, the FOCUS of Judaism shifted from the sacrificial rite of the Temple...
 - To the study of the Torah & its accompanying oral tradition in academies & synagogues...
- So it was no longer the priests who had a major role in Jewish life... but the RABBIS who held Judaism together...
 - Their synagogues became centers not only for study & worship... but for congregational life in general!

- It’s here that Judaism acquired a distinctively intellectual dimension & character...
- Which kept the faith alive for over 2000 years...

Scholars will tell you that there’s nothing one has to believe to be a Jew... there is no “official creed” in Judaism...

- Jews run the gamut... from those who believe that every letter & punctuation mark of the Torah was dictated by God... to those who do not believe in God at all!
- While Judaism contains many variations & sub-groups... there are 3 main branches (denominations):
 - ORTHODOX Jews... believe that the Torah & Talmud both were given by God at one period of time on Mt. Sinai.
 - Orthodox Jews look for the coming of the Messiah’s reign in Jerusalem as Messiah of the whole world.
 - CONSERVATIVE Jews... hold that the Torah is divinely *given*... but the Talmud is divinely *inspired*.
 - REFORM Jews... believe that the Torah is divinely inspired and that the Talmud was written by human beings.
 - Reform Jews, by and large, do not believe in a personal Messiah... believing instead that Jews live as instruments of God in the world.
- Huston Smith comments that Judaism is less orthodoxy than an “orthopraxis”... that Jews are more united by what they DO than by what they think!
 - Isaac Deutscher, a self-confessed atheist, said in his book *The Non-Jewish Jew*...
 - “What then makes a Jew? Religion? I am an atheist. Jewish Nationalism? I am an Internationalist. In neither sense am I therefore, a Jew. I am, however, a Jew by force of my unconditional solidarity with the persecuted & exterminated. I am a Jew because I

feel the Jewish tragedy as my own tragedy; because I feel the pulse of Jewish history; because I should like to do all I can do to assure the real, not spurious, security & self-respect of the Jews.”

This past week I had the pleasure of visiting Temple Emanu-el...

- Located on the Pali Highway... this Reform branch of Judaism is home to some 250 families, covering a wide range of ages...
 - Most of their congregation has come from the mainland at one point or another... though some have been in Hawaii for a while!
 - [Note: this is not the only Jewish community on Oahu... there's a Conservative group that meets in the Unitarian Church next door to Temple Emanu-El... and an orthodox group that meets in Waikiki.]
- This congregation gathers for their primary worship every Friday night... at the beginning of the Sabbath...
 - They also have Hebrew School on Wednesday nights...
 - As well as their Religious School on Sunday mornings (with about 60 children from pre-K through 8th grade).
- Rabbi Schaktman (pictured on the left) has been serving this congregation since 2005...
 - A native of NY, the Rabbi grew up outside of Buffalo... & spent much of his life in New York City...
 - (Though he also served pulpits in Texas as well!)
 - I found Rabbi Shactman to be extremely thoughtful & reflective (as well as gracious) when I talked story with him during our visit...
- I asked him about some of the challenges that his congregation might face in living out their faith here in Hawaii...
 - He commented on how the social life in Judaism is so important.
 - But Hawaii is very different from other places... “Nobody comes to Hawaii to ‘be Jewish,’” he said.

- There’s a greater emphasis on blending here in the islands... rather than maintaining one’s “distinctiveness.”
- Rabbi Shacktman agreed that ‘being Jewish’ means many different things to many different people...
 - It can be grounded in ethnic... historic... cultural... or faith-based identities...
 - But from a faith standpoint... he sees the essence of Judaism as the understanding that the Jewish people are involved in a unique covenantal relationship with God... and their very lives & behavior flow from that relationship!
- When I asked him about what might be most ‘misunderstood’ by those of us outside the Jewish community... he said it would probably be the notion of “chosenness.”
 - Many people assume that this is an elitist notion, but that’s really not the case...
 - It’s not about “being special” over and against everyone else...
 - It’s not experienced that way in the Jewish community...
 - He said, “The oldest child in a family often has responsibilities that the other children don’t have. That doesn’t make this child loved any more or less than the rest of the family... they’re just different. They have different expectations placed upon them... we don’t compare the children!”
- Huston Smith echoed this in his book...
 - “The Jews did not see themselves as singled out for privileges,” he writes...
 - “They were chosen to serve, and to suffer the trials that service would often exact. By requiring they ‘do & obey all that the LORD has spoken,’ their election imposed on them a far more demanding morality than was expected of their peers.”

There are a lot of things that we Christians share in common with our Jewish brothers & sisters...

- As you might expect, the main difference is our understanding of Jesus...
 - For the Jews, Jesus was an important rabbi... a teacher... perhaps even a prophet...
 - For the Christian, Jesus is God incarnate... God's only Son... the Savior of the world... the Christ.
- One reason many Jews of Jesus' time didn't accept Jesus as the Messiah... was because Jesus didn't seem to them to fulfill the letter of the OT prophecy...
 - About an age of universal peace & the restored glory of the kingdom of Israel...
 - These events didn't occur in Jesus' time...
- But for those of us who do follow Jesus... we, in turn, saw a different kind of Savior...
 - One who lived out the Shema... and in his loving God with all of his heart, soul & might... gave himself away completely to the world.
 - One who found the purpose of his life by losing it...
- Nevertheless... the Jewish people have been blamed – undeservedly – for the death of Jesus...
 - Jews have suffered great persecutions throughout their history... often at the hands of Christians...
 - This is not right.
 - Our task today, my friends, is to overcome the prejudice & persecution... and reach out to our Jewish brothers and sisters in genuine love.
 - For we do have a lot in common! Thanks be to God. AMEN.