

“Demanding Explanations”
March 2, 2008

John 9:1-34

Oh, my friends, I knew this day would come. I knew I wouldn't be able to avoid it forever, but I sure was hoping that it wouldn't come for at least a little while longer. Ah, well: *c'est la vie*.

The day that has come is the day when I need to invite you into the Gospel of John at a point where we encounter one of its most disturbing, if not downright destructive, characteristics. I need to invite you to join me in the Gospel of John and to begin to grapple with its attitude toward “the Jews.” I need to invite all of us into this morning's reading, so that we can see if there is anything here, in the midst of this Gospel's highly negative depiction of “the Jews,” that offers hope, healing, or holy challenge. I need to invite you this morning to be willing to ask the question, “Is there any genuinely good news, any genuine ‘*gospel*,’ in this ancient story,” when it portrays “the Jews” as the ones who oppose Jesus, who persecute his followers, and who are allied with the forces of darkness.

In other words, the day has come when I need to invite all of us in this church, a church where we joyfully celebrate our relationship with a *Jewish* congregation, to ask the question, “What in the world are we to do with the Gospel of John and its portrait of ‘the Jews’?”

For starters, I recommend that we be willing to come face to face with this Gospel and neither ignore nor dismiss as unimportant what it says about “the Jews.” As New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine notes in the book we've been using in our Lenten book study, the Gospel of John mentions “the Jews” 70 times, and the references are rarely, if ever, anything other than overwhelmingly negative, even slanderous. In the Gospel of John, the cosmos is sharply divided between light and dark, good and evil, the believers and the unbelievers, and “the Jews” are always living on the wrong side of the cosmological tracks. And, sadly, horribly, the history of Christian attitudes and actions toward “the Jews” has reflected and amplified this slander for centuries. We can't wish that history away, and we can't wish the Gospel of John away, either.

So, after we've been willing to come face to face with what this Gospel says about “the Jews,” I recommend that we be willing to come face to face with something else. I recommend that we face *and accept* the truth that no amount of research or conjecture will ever be able to tell us just why the people who gave the world this particular gospel felt compelled to tell the story of Jesus in this particular way. As much as we might want a definitive explanation for John's jarring portrait of “the Jews,” we're not going to get one.

If that's hard to accept, remember that, in our own lives, we don't always get to know how and why events happen and how and why people do what they do. Recognizing the limits of our understanding really shouldn't be all that hard. I'm confident that there are at least some things you yourselves do that you can't exactly explain, and I'm even more confident that there are *many* things your friends, family, neighbors, and acquaintances do that you can't explain, either. Whether we're thinking about ourselves or about others, we may have an intriguing theory or two, but we're

usually willing to admit that some things – *many* things – remain unexplainable, inexplicable, and even incomprehensible. So I hope that, when we’re dealing with events and people from nearly 2000 years ago, we don’t have to go searching for any *extra* humility to be able to say, “We don’t exactly know why, and we can’t fully explain it.”

But please understand: I’m not dismissing the importance of efforts by historians, theologians, sociologists, psychologists, and regular folks like you and me to *try* to understand and explain the Gospel of John and its portrait of “the Jews.” I think those efforts are important ... and fascinating. But what I *am* saying is that, if we’re demanding a surefire, ironclad explanation for John’s relentlessly negative attitude toward “the Jews,” we’re going to be disappointed, at least in this lifetime.

So now that we’ve both acknowledged *and I’ve sidestepped* the problem of explaining why the entire Gospel of John repeatedly condemns “the Jews,” what’s left for us to do with this Gospel? Let’s leave explanations behind for a moment, and embrace *imagination*. Try to imagine yourself as the one who wrote the Gospel of John; try to imagine yourself as a part of the community that repeated these stories before they were written down. Try to see yourself as someone who would describe another group of people the way the Gospel of John describes “the Jews.” Try to imagine that, from a combination of, perhaps, fear, pain, resentment, and anger, judgment and condemnation shape your thoughts and your words.

Now, before you quickly reassure yourself that you’d never do anything like that – you’re good church folks, after all – think a little harder. Haven’t there been times – aren’t there *still* times – when you encounter, read, or hear about someone or a group of “someones” who seem foreign, alien, threatening, *incomprehensible* to you ... and you find yourself thinking about them as “those people,” the people who are causing so much trouble, the people who are so “wrong” in some significant way?

Anyone willing to ‘fess up and admit that there have been times when you’ve done that? What about those of you who are sure you’ve never done any such thing? If you don’t remember thinking about other people the way that the Gospel of John seems to “think” about “the Jews,” let me offer a few reminders, based on my experiences here in this congregation and here in this heart and mind. Consider what you’ve thought or said about people who drive SUV’s. About people who vote Republican – or who vote Democratic. How about fundamentalist Christians? Evangelicals? Gang members? Undocumented immigrants? How about poor people you don’t think are trying hard enough to get out of poverty, or rich people you don’t think are trying hard enough to help poor people?

Haven’t you joined John, at some time or another, in demonizing and judging other people because their vision of how to live isn’t *your* vision? If you have, my dear brothers and sisters, welcome to the human race. If you’ve ever taken a Gospel of John-like stance toward group of people, welcome to being a perfectly human human being.

I doubt that the people who created the Gospel of John intended to give us their own example as something we are called to avoid, but they did. I doubt that the people who bequeathed us the Gospel of John intended to set the stage for centuries of persecution of “the Jews,” but they did. We may not be able to explain why this Gospel describes “the Jews” in such overwhelmingly negative terms, but we can decide and discern what wisdom *and what warning* we’ll take from it. We can hear God’s call to

distinguish between the truths and the distortions in these words [the order of worship], in this book [the Bible], and in our own lives.

As we try to distinguish between truth and distortion, I hope we remember that we're not that different from the people who told the stories in this book, passing them down from generation to generation, down to us in the 21st century. Yes, we know about things they didn't know about – the human genome, nanotechnology, neuroscience, and a cosmos filled with galaxies. And, of course, there's a thing or two they could tell *us* about: how to survive and even thrive without the technology we can consider essential and how to live a life of faith in the midst of poverty, violence, repression, and oppression.

We and our ancestors in faith may indeed be different in what we *know*, but we're not so different in who we *are*. We and they are human beings who act and speak from fear, from arrogance, and from judgment. We and they are people who can become convinced that our pathway toward God is the only pathway, and we and they can do that whether we take the Bible literally or metaphorically, whether our theology is conservative or progressive, whether it's the Bible or science that we trust, and whether we call ourselves Jews, Christians, Muslims, or Buddhists ... or Baptists, Mormons, or Congregationalists.

But ... but we and our ancestors in faith are also people who can act and speak from hope, from humility, and from compassion. We and they are people whose lives and stories can reveal some of the beauty and the truth of God. We and they are people who can meet others who are walking on their own pathways and learn to help one another along the way. We and they are people who have some wisdom, love, and encouragement to offer, even though what we have to offer can be muddled and even buried by our fears of the unknown or our fears for our very survival.

We have so much left to discover from one another, from the Christian tradition, from other traditions, and, yes, even from the Gospel of John. We will never learn all that there is to learn, and we will never be able to explain all that we wish we could explain and understand. As we continue to grow as people created and call together by the Spirit of God, may we always be ready to embrace the wisdom – and to learn from the mistakes – of the past and the present.

Amen.

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