

What Can Christians Learn From Jews?

Amos 5:23-24; Micah 6:8; Matthew 21:28-31

Christianity and Judaism are the two most closely related of all the world's religions. There are certainly many unique beliefs and practices within each religion, but like it or not, these two faiths are related; members of the same family, if you will.

But Christians have never been too excited about this family connection. I dare say that's an understatement! At best, Judaism is acknowledged as the faith of Jesus' origin. In fact historically, Christians have been antagonistic, persecuting Jewish people down through the centuries. The term "Christ-killer" was often used as an excuse to inflict terror and destruction on people who were already the victims of tremendous prejudice.

The epitome of this attitude is of course the German Holocaust. To be fair, there were definitely other people groups who were persecuted and sent to death camps. But again, the Christian Church was virtually silent while victims died in gas chambers. And, in fact, our "Christian Nation" along with other nations quite frankly, refused to offer asylum or refuge to potentially hundreds of thousands of victims.

A German pastor, speaking after the war, said: "They came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Socialist. They came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist. They came for the Jews and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. They came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me."

Moving into the present, let's take a look at some of our common ground. Along with what we share, I believe there are lessons to be learned from our "older sisters and brothers." I used that term because even the most exclusive views of Christian faith will admit that Jews and Christians worship the same God.

Every Jewish child is taught the Shema. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Many Jewish adults teach their children to recite the Shema at the beginning and the end of each day. I wonder if our faith and our actions might not benefit from such a daily reminder of the God we are to worship and people we are to love?

As those who share the worship of the One God, we also share the same scriptures. As such, we share the same faith stories; creation, the narratives of Genesis and Exodus; the

Torah and the rest of the Hebrew scriptures. As we worship the same God and share the same “book” we share many of the same teachings.

Christianity, from the very beginning has taught that our lives should reflect our faith. However, there is also a tension that is addressed in the Christian scriptures, the New Testament. The tension is addressed, but never entirely resolved. The tension exists in our definition of what it means to be a person of faith. Are Christians known as people of faith because they do the right things? Or is a Christian someone who believes the right doctrine?

This uneasy tension has most often been resolved by teaching that right practice is important, but when push comes to shove, right belief is MORE important! The tension between orthopraxy (Big word; means right practice or good works) and orthodoxy (Right beliefs) has often been the source of division between Christians. The history of Christians splitting up into various denominations has most often been due to a difference in the definition of some particular “right” belief.

Jews and Christians worship the same God and we share the same “BOOK”. We share the same teaching that our greatest commandment is to love God and to love others.

We also share the teachings that God's deepest desire is that we learn that loving people is accomplished when we practice justice, offer mercy and when we become advocates for those who are often overlooked by the rest of society.

Time and again, Israel's prophets would confront the people with this spiritual reality. In the BOOK we share with our Jewish relatives, the prophet Amos claims to be speaking for God as he says, *Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!* Amos 5:23-24

And Micah, another prophet says this, *God has shown all you people what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.* Micah 6:8

I believe that our Christian focus on right beliefs has often kept the Church from focusing on the core desire of God's heart. If God is so concerned about our need to love other people, then why are we so concerned about a particular "belief?"

I believe there's a good reason the early church preserved this story about Jesus. He was speaking to religious leaders in the temple and he told this story... *"There was a man who had*

two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' " 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. "Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered." Matthew 21:28-31

I believe there is much more we can learn from our Jewish sisters and brothers. However, those lessons will have to wait until another time. In closing, let's all, as a church and as individuals, make an effort to focus more on "Loving God BY loving other people" than we focus on believing the "right" doctrine.

I keep praying this for myself. And I'll invite you to pray it with me right now in the words of our prayer... Pray with me, *God, help me see what you want me to see. Jesus, help me love myself and others as you want me to love. Holy Spirit, help me live in the power of faith, in the optimism of hope and in the joy of love. Amen.*