

# SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

August 27, 2006 – Pentecost 12b

Text: John 6:56-69

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## “Bearing St. John’s Burdens”

St. John, the author of our Gospel reading, places Jesus in conflict in a Jewish synagogue -- in Capernaum. While Jesus often went to Capernaum, John’s angry words reflect what is taking place as he writes in Patmos many years after Jesus: the bitter divorce of synagogue and church. His anger against fellow Jews appears in John’s Gospel in many places. Hence, bearing St. John’s burdens.

This reality of Patmos Judaism versus Patmos Christianity may be a little humbling for us -- since I am speaking about the Gospel -- or rather not the Gospel but the historical context for today’s Gospel. For if I am useful to God, the Gospel, the truly Holy Gospel, will shine forth regardless of Patmos, St. John or me.

But Patmos provides me with an opportunity to talk with you about anti-Judaism in the Christian Bible, the New Testament. I confess, I do this partly because of my paternal Jewish roots and because of the dialogues in which I have participated with Jewish communities over the years. I do this also because I believe we can grow in Eucharistic love for our Jewish sisters and brothers. I do this to free us from anti-Semitism too. I do this for truly Good News.

I do this also to help you understand both the integrity of your Christian faith and the integrity of the Jewish faith -- and by extension, assist you with truth questions regarding the many religions in our steadily shrinking world. In short, I believe you will hear the Gospel and your faith will be strengthened. And, you will come to love the San Francisco Jewish community all the more.

I begin with this rule of thumb: the more you see the humanity of the Bible the more you will see its divinity. The more you suppress that humanity, the human side of the Biblical writers, the less you will see of the living incarnate God.

Now the Bible is a subtle book. What we have called the Old Testament is really a God-inspired family argument over several hundred years between members of the Jewish community, and, like all family arguments, outsiders can misinterpret them badly. So we should be very wary of anyone who literally reads the family fights as somehow universalized into the total rejection of Judaism by God.

What we call the New Testament is a collection of God-inspired writings written within just seventy five years often reflecting this struggle -- what to do with the Gentiles who want to join

the Jesus movement and with fellow Jews who don't. St. John of Patmos, a Christian Jew writes when the Jewish issue is solving itself: synagogue and church are finally and permanently dividing -- bitterly.

At first the followers of Jesus were mainly Jews and often worshipped in the synagogues. But there came a flashpoint that ended the tenuous partnership -- and synagogues began to split between followers of Jesus and those who did not see Jesus as the Messiah. Families were painfully divided. Some of us have felt that kind of pain through the Seminex event, or when St. Francis was expelled from the ELCA. There is a lot of pain to go around -- and John, as well as Luke, reflect the pain and the anger. Luke and John say awful things about Jews, truly awful things, that are dis-graceful but all too human in our Holy Writ. So in some parts of our Christian Testament there is a lot of anger directed against Jews by Christian Jews. Family intensities.

The question of the place of the non-Christian Jewish people in God's plan is not solved in our so-called New Testament -- although the Book of Hebrews thinks it is. St. Paul, in his most measured reflections in Romans chapters 9-11, puzzles over and over the Jewish people and their eternal covenant. But finally he admits it is a mystery in God's hands alone. What a different world we would have had if people had taken Paul's final advice to heart!

But people who read the Bible literally misunderstand the Jewish family argument in the Hebrew Bible as God's rejection of the Jews and misread the anger in the New Testament as proof of that rejection. It's been going on for 1900 years and is very deep in us.

So deep is this anti-Jewish misreading of Scripture in the church that when a fundamentalist like Mel Gibson gets really drunk he lets it loose from the depths. So we have to ask ourselves: how much have we absorbed that anti-Jewish anger from the traditional reading of our New Testament? We need to think about the hostility to Jews in our Testament and its effect on our children.

In the language of this morning's Gospel, are my words to you "a teaching too difficult to accept"? But once the veil has fallen from our eyes, Luke, Acts, John and Hebrews will make you uncomfortable at times and should grieve the Holy Spirit in you. You will be uncomfortable with them even though you will always glean the light of the living Christ from them too. Both human and divine.

In fact those fallen writers of our New Testament are much like us. We all can be so blind to our prejudices. We have feet of clay too -- and yet, like St. Luke and St. John, we are saints by the grace of God through Christ's cross. Through baptism they and we are reborn into the family of grace and fed with the living Word proclaimed by mouth and proclaimed in the mouth through bread and wine, the flesh and blood of Christ of the Eucharistic table.

Here is the beginning of really good news for us. For, when we come to admit the real humanity of the writers of our sacred texts, its angry anti-Judaism agenda, our eyes are opened with love and respect not only for our humanly divine Scriptures but also for the Jewish communities who have survived almost in spite of us.

Our context for thinking about Jews and Judaism catches up with St. Paul at the end of the eleventh chapter:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways! For who has known the mind of God?

We do not come with some arrogant presupposition, but with wonder and respect for a people who have used the word "God" at least double the millennia than we have. We come into their presence awed and humbled at the terrible survival struggles inflicted upon them in the name of Jesus, a Jew himself who was observant of Torah. We come in silence and respect and now even with a glimpse of how to greet the other religions all around us.

And yet we humbly dare to say that Jesus has known the mind of God better than all of his churches combined. He gives us eternal life in that Eucharistic bread and wine -- a life not in elitist doctrines or a ghetto attitude, but a glimpse at the inscrutable ways of God and to behold our Jewish, our Hindu, our Muslim, our Buddhist and other religious sisters and brothers in respectful love. We bear St. John's burdens and yet we are nourished by him.

*Amen*

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