

John 6:65 (NRSV)

⁶⁵ And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

John 14:6 (NRSV)

⁶ Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

John 15:14 (NRSV)

¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you.

John 15:1–17 (NRSV)

Jesus the True Vine

15 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹² “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Full Circle

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: September 19, 2010 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: *John 15:1-17*

Last week we met Jim Carroll's Uncle Jim. Uncle Jim died a hero. But we found out that within just a few decades of his death Uncle Jim's heroism was entirely misremembered. He was remembered as an Irish rebel who died in the General Post Office rebellion of 1916. In fact he died as a loyal soldier of the British Crown in World War I in France. The memory wasn't just a little mixed up. What was remembered was almost completely different from the truth. And we found that there was a bigger misremembering going on in this situation, too. About 250 rebels participated in the Irish rebellion of 1916. 250,000 Irish soldiers were fighting for Britain at the same time. But the remembered story of that era says that all of Catholic Ireland took part in the uprising. The remembered story was, quite simply, in a major way false; it erased—it hit the delete button—on the far more noteworthy events of the day. It turns out that rewriting history has a long pedigree.

Indeed, we found that in the story of Jesus there was similar misremembering. For example, the presence of Rome in the Jewish provinces was barely mentioned. Yet, truth be told, Rome was the story. Her presence was brutal and pervasive. She, and she alone, enforced the law and meted out the punishments. And so when we read in Josephus, a contemporary of Jesus and an historian, when we hear from Josephus that Pilate condemned Jesus to crucifixion, we can be sure that it was Pilate, and that he needed not nor sought help from any crowd.

And yet our Gospels deeply implicate the crowds and, especially in the case of John, the Jews as a whole in Jesus' death. It is a misremembering, not unlike misremembering Uncle Jim. And like the memory of the Irish rebellion, the false parts have spawned unfathomable bloodshed and caused unspeakable sorrow. This is a legacy of our Gospels with which every Christian must grapple, for even as we speak, misremembered history, rewritten history is being marshaled to inflame ugly passions in the name of God.

But that is not the whole of it, thank God. So, this morning we will try to understand how it all developed and then why, despite the travesties committed in its name, there is a jewel at the heart of the Christian Gospel.

As we discovered last time, Jesus was among the critics of the Temple establishment. Like John the Baptist, Jesus was a reformer. He was a critic of the Temple authorities, who he thought compromised their faith to pacify Rome. Now remember, this was fairly common. There were many forms of Judaism in that day, and they wrestled with one another in family feuds. These were not especially violent or dangerous in themselves. And it should not be thought that Jesus was somehow against the Temple. He was a faithful Jew who believed that the Temple could be better.

If we were to reconstruct Holy Week, we should imagine Jerusalem as a tinderbox. Jews from everywhere would be coming on the Passover pilgrimage to worship at the Temple. In these celebrations and always, Rome had a simple idea of law enforcement. Any commotion was met with swift and brutal action, very few questions asked. The Temple was especially watched. In fact, the Romans had built an armed fortress into the walls of the Temple Mount.

From this garrison the military would move quickly to suppress any disturbance. The crowds of the Passover put everyone on edge. Inevitably somewhere sparks would fly. The tinder was dry as a bone. The situation was quite literally explosive.

All four of the Gospels tell of Jesus overturning the tables in the Temple. Now, remember the misremembering about Uncle Jim. Apparently Jesus did something provocative in the Temple. It would have been part of the normal Jewish in-fighting and parochial controversies of the day. It would not have been all that out of the ordinary. But viewed from the fortress, where nuances and details were of no matter, the soldiers would have seen in Jesus a menace, a pest to be squashed. And so he was. Somewhere between 26 and 33 of the Common Era Jesus was crucified at the direction of Pontius Pilate. On the third day he rose. Over the next while he appeared to his disciples and a few others. The rest, as they say, is history. But as we shall see, history more and more misremembered as time went by.

Over the next decade or so the little group of Jesus believers grew. It was new piece of cloth in the quilt of Jewish religion. Within a couple of years Paul was converted to Christianity. Now Paul is important to the story for many reasons. For our interests today, Paul's writings are the earliest documents of the church, the first memories, so to speak. But even Paul's letters don't begin until about 20 years after his conversion, somewhere around 50 CE, in other words, well into his ministry. As you may recall, Paul had more than a few disagreements with the Jerusalem Christians. In Jerusalem they continued to follow the Jewish dietary and circumcision practices. Paul was dead set against requiring these practices of new converts. You may also recall that Jesus' crucifixion is of huge importance to Paul. The ignominy of Jesus' death on a cross was the centerpiece for Paul's idea that it is in weakness that God shows power. So, the crucifixion is central to Paul, and Paul has clashes with the Jerusalem Christians, but not once in all his writings does Paul blame the Jews for Jesus' death. Arguments from silence may be of questionable worth, but this is a resounding quietness. If Paul had an axe to grind here, it would seem more than unlikely that we would never hear about it.

Paul writes letters for roughly 15 years. After Paul's writings come the Gospels, beginning about 40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. During this 40 year period since Jesus' death and resurrection, things in Jerusalem became increasingly unsettled. In the mid-60s it all blew up, and in 70 Rome obliterated the Jerusalem Temple. It would be hard to overstate the impact. The loss of the Temple marked the loss of the hub and the heart of the Jewish religion. It was a catastrophe. In addition, the Sadducees, the scribes, and the chief priests were out of work. The Pharisees, who before this were a relatively minor reform group, rose in stature. The Pharisees became the leaders of rabbinic Judaism, the Judaism without the Temple, which met in synagogues. It was the beginning of modern Judaism. Today's Judaisms are its direct descendents.

Around this same time scholars believe Mark's Gospel was written. If you look at the bottom of the chart I have handed out, you will see that now, around 40 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, and 20 years after Paul's first letters, we see for the first time that the chief priests and the crowd are implicated in Jesus' death. Over this 40 year period, as the struggle between the Christian Jews and other Jews heated up, the story began to change to implicate the Jewish religious leaders. Remember Uncle Jim.

Notice also, Mark is written right around the time that the Temple is destroyed, and in Mark the Pharisees do not figure prominently. Mark was written when the Pharisees were as yet minor players.

But as the time goes by, this begins to shift in the later Gospels. Mathew and Luke, written about 15 years later, portray Jesus in much more conflict with the Pharisees. This, of course, reflects the importance the Pharisees play after the fall of the Temple, not in Jesus' day. Oh, remember Uncle Jim.

5 or 10 years later comes the Gospel of John. While the Pharisees are still maligned in John, for the first time in the Gospels we see the Jews as a whole painted with the crime of Jesus' death. Until this time the word Jews appears in the Gospels primarily when Jesus is being referred to as the king of the Jews. In John the word Jews is used a whopping 66 times and most of the time it is used to blame the death of Jesus on the Jews. Acts of the Apostles, written about the same time as John, is similar. In Acts, Paul is said to go throughout the Mediterranean world saying to Jews in the Diaspora, "...Jesus, whom you killed," even though Paul says nothing like this even once in his own writings.

So, what's going on? Why the changes? Several things. After the Temple was destroyed in 70, all Jewish religion was set adrift, including the Christian Judaism. Also, Christian Judaism largely disappeared from the Jerusalem area. Increasingly, then, Christianity became removed from her beginnings both by time and place. When Uncle Jim's family came to America, his myth could grow unfettered by facts on the ground. In the late first century Christianity, and other forms of Jewish religion, too, were separated from their place of origin.

At the same time, and ironically for the same reasons, telling the stories became more urgent. The loss of the Temple was catastrophic. Disconnected from her mooring, what Jewish religion was to look like was up for grabs and, indeed, the future of Jewish religion was even in question. In this charged moment two forms of Jewish religion vied to become that future: Pharisaic Judaism and Christianity. They became bitter rivals. It got pretty ugly. In Matthew and Luke the Pharisees became some Jesus' main opponents.

To prove that they are the rightful heirs to Jewish religion, the Matthew and Luke bend over backwards to prove that Jesus is the Messiah clearly prophesied in the Old Testament. If Jesus is the Messiah foretold in the Bible, the argument went, then, clearly, Christianity is the rightful heir to the future of Judaism. On the flip side of the coin, to make the argument watertight, Matthew and Luke blamed the Pharisees for rejecting Jesus. Jesus was the prophesied Messiah, and you missed it, they said. The rhetoric of condemnation wasn't all in one direction, either. In many of the synagogues, the worshippers were required to confess that Christians were heretics.

By the time we get to the 80s and 90s, Christianity is becoming more and more a separate religion, and both John and Acts even more forcefully lay claim to the Messiah and to the idea that the Jews both missed him and killed him. As in the memory of Uncle Jim, the facts have become pretty skewed.

I think it's helpful when we read John to know the context. The battle for the future was fierce. Jesus says in John, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." In the pitch of battle for the soul of the Jewish religion John was saying, it's this way, not that way. I may wish John had said it differently, and I do, but we should all be clear that these words mean something different when said by a religious movement fighting for its life than they do when uttered by the religion backed by the power Empire, which of course, Christianity became. In the hands of power, the danger of these sentiments increases exponentially. This danger made manifest is the great burden and confession of our history, which ought to always be before our eyes.

Let me now turn to another side of the Gospel. If the misremembering were all there were to the Gospel, and there are those who would say that it was, if the misremembering were all there were to the Gospel, then we would be wise to tear down the churches throw the whole project to the flames. But the Gospel writers weren't liars. Jim Carroll says,

"It is nevertheless important to emphasize that, well after the life of Jesus, those who remembered the conflicts surrounding both its beginning and its end mainly as conflicts among Jews - Herod's villainy, not Caesar's; the high priest's, not Pilate's - were being true to the ways these events had come to be understood in the period of heightened Jewish sectarianism that followed Jesus' death." Not "innocent," yet they were not liars either. The Gospel of Matthew was not composed by someone who had been there, not composed by someone who knew well that Pilate was a sadist who'd have thought nothing of dispatching an unknown Galilean troublemaker, and, knowing this, still consciously and falsely portrayed the Romans as innocent and "the Jews" as guilty. It would be a slander to say such a thing of Matthew (or the writers of that Gospel), just as it would slander my mother to say she lied to me when she led me to think her uncle was a hero of the Easter Rising."

The Gospel writers were engaged in this struggle because in Jesus they had found something so precious they could not let it die. When we read the John, then, it is a two fold project. One part is to identify the misrememberings and see them for what they are. The other part is to behold the jewel that remains.

"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." Amen.