

Rabbi Micah Greenstein's Sermon given at St. Mary's Sept. 9, 2001

My dear friends, what a wonderful weekend this has been for our two congregations. The sound of our choir is the sound of God's voice. Your spiritual leader and my good friend, C B Baker, delivered an inspired sermon at Temple Israel at our Sabbath Service on Friday night. Last week, I journeyed out to Elmwood Cemetery where the Sisters of St. Mary's are buried, in anticipation of this day. I said the same prayer in the Temple cemetery where Rabbi Samfield is buried. That prayer is really a hope, the hope that C B and I, and our two congregations will continue to be God's helping hands in this city, just as Rabbi Samfield and the Sisters of St. Mary's were when the yellow fever led to the deaths of millions and the exodus of just as many Memphians from the epidemic. I'm not sure that we would be as brave as those Sisters and Rabbi Samfield were, but we're both honored to be associated with their name, and this weekend, both here and at Temple, is a perpetuation of their remarkable legacy.

This historic congregation gives me spiritual goosebumps whenever I'm here. It reminds me of our father Jacob's comments in Genesis, "Mah norah hamakom hazeh," "How literally awesome is this place," this "house of God." What a treasure this cathedral is, not only for the diocese and the city, but above all else, for those who have the privilege of calling St. Mary's Cathedral their spiritual home.

Spirituality is where you and God meet and what you do about it. This place and Temple are two beautiful places to meet God, and what's even more impressive is what we do about it outside the walls of our worship space.

One of my teachers, who is also a rabbi, used to get together with his friend, the Episcopal priest, in their small New England town. They were cautiously fascinated by each other's faith. They visited each other's place of prayer, they visited each other's homes, and each month, at their standing lunch date, they would write each other a one-page essay on the same topic to learn of each other's religion in some greater depth. The topics were predictable, "God, Bible, Israel, salvation." The only rule they set for themselves was to be completely honest. By the sixth or seventh lunch, they agreed that they were ready to write about Jesus. This is what my teacher wrote to his friend the Episcopal priest twenty-five years ago and share with him over lunch:

"I am wary of Jesus. Not because of anything he taught or even because of anything his disciples taught about him. (Although some of the things the author of John's gospel said about me and my people ought to be forever banned from public reading by any person who thinks loving people is important). Whether they were mistaken or merely premature, the idea that God should at last take the form of a human being, that the yearning God and humanity share for one another should be focused in

one person is a very compelling vision: Word become flesh. For millennia, we Jews had tried to make it work in the other direction, from the bottom up. Raising ourselves to the ideal of Torah teaching, Judaism seeks to raise ordinary people to the realization of holiness, transforming flesh into word. Then came Christianity, teaching that Jesus represented an attempt to understand the yearning from the other direction. Truth be told: Neither tradition has yet succeeded."

I am wary of Jesus because of history and what so many of those who said they believed in him have done to my people. Christianity, you can say, has ruined Jesus for me. Somehow through the ages the suffering of Jesus has become confused with the suffering of the Jewish people, my people, me. That is the key to my problem with him. His death has even become causally linked and used as a justification for my people's suffering. Is there anyone, for instance, who could deny the intimate relationship of Christian Europe and the Holocaust? Nevertheless, I still believe in the coming of a redeemer when the great Sinai teaching will at last be realized."

That's what the rabbi wrote and handed his priest friend as they sat down. But then something surprising and transforming happened. The Episcopal priest finished the page, slowly set it down on his plate, and looked up at his rabbi friend. His face was ashen. The rabbi feared he had crossed some line and with his smug bluntness had injured his friend. But to the rabbi's surprise, the priest only whispered, "Please forgive me, forgive us. It could not have been Jesus **those** Christians served." His eyes were moist with tears and his empathy seemed to grow directly from the core of his faith.

"Your religion," the rabbi said, "wants you to care about me **that** much?" "Oh yes," the priest said. "Don't you see, I must continuously seek to find God in every person. Jesus is only the beginning. You, my rabbi friend, are easy. But the ultimate goal is to find my Lord within everyone - even people I like a lot less than you, even people I dislike, even ones I despise."

In different ways, through different paths to the same God, Judaism and Christianity invite us to wake up and open our eyes to the beautiful, mysterious, and holy things happening all around us every day. Many of them are like little miracles: when we wake up on a Sunday such as this and see the morning light, when we taste food and are nourished, when we learn from others and grow wise, when we embrace people we love and receive their affection in return, when we help those around us and feel god. All these and more are there for us every day. But we must open our eyes to see them...that's what both of our faiths do in different ways. Both answer the question, "How do you wake up?" when your eyes are spiritually closed.

Jews wake up by doing mitzvot. Mitzvot are sacred deeds or divine commandments we do because we believe God calls on us personally to do them. One of my teachers, Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf explained this with the following metaphor:

Being a Jew means you walk along a street studded with precious stones. The goal is to gather as many as you can. Each is a mitzvah, a divine commandment or sacred deed. Some of the jewels are easily dislodged from the pavement and put into one's knapsack. But others are more difficult to do and understand. They effectively remain stuck. It is like that with the mitzvot. Some, like honoring parents or helping others, are relatively easy to understand; others, like not eating forbidden foods or not gossiping, are more difficult. When Jews perform a mitzvah, we make it ours, it becomes part of us. In this way, performing a mitzvah changes us and brings us closer to God. These holy deeds are Judaism's way of realizing the holiness hidden everywhere and our task as Jews and God's children to bring that holiness out in the world.

The High Holyday season is only one week away for Jews, and this season is all about returning. In Hebrew we call it teshuvah, which is usually translated as repentance but can also mean "answer," "apology" and above all else "return" - as in going back to who you meant to be, returning home, returning to your Source. While this is the dominant theme for the Jewish season known as the High Holydays, it's a shared theme for our two faiths. For practicing Judaism and Christianity are different ways of returning to God, of going home, of going back to your ultimate source. Our faiths are different ways of letting go of our arrogance and sinfulness and once again placing our trust in God. They are joyous faiths which teach that even the most degenerate sinner can be reunited with God. Indeed, according to Jewish tradition, someone who has strayed and made the return to God by repenting and doing teshuvah is more beloved by God than someone who has never sinned! Through apology, repair, and attempting to heal damage done, Christianity and Judaism are surprisingly similar, and what a fortuitous time to meet and share all this, as we begin the Jewish holydays, the season of greatest healing in our festival calendar.

To be sure, Judaism and Christianity differ in important ways. Each has a unique way of understanding our spiritual condition. The primary spiritual symbol in Judaism is what we call Torah: Hebrew for the handwritten parchment scroll of the Five Books of Moses. It represents the awesome possibility that God can and does communicate with people. You might say that the Jewish people are brought into being with the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai and that we Jews renew ourselves again and again through studying, interpreting, even arguing over what it means. The very existence of Torah is a tangible symbol of the love and intimacy and unshakable covenant between God and the Jewish people. Christianity, for its own purposes, often mistakenly understands Torah as "nomos" or law. But a more accurate translation would be "teaching" or simply "the way." Torah is the sacred story and way of God and the Jewish people. Like any long-term loving relationship, it has its ups and downs, romance and disappointments. But it's forever.

Judaism also has no dogma. One's Judaism is not a matter of what you believe, it's a matter of belonging to the faith-family of the Jewish people and it's organized around sacred deeds, "mitzvot." To make matters even more confusing, one's Jewish identity (whether or not you are a Jew) has virtually nothing to do with what you believe, unless you believe that Jesus is your personal savior, in which case you have taken a giant step toward becoming a Christian). Judaism is a complete, self-contained religion. It needs nothing to complete it - not the New Testament, Jesus, fewer laws, or anything else. For classical Judaism even the coming of the Messiah would not "complete" Judaism. It would bring an end to history and resolve every problem for every religion and every person.

Even though Judaism and Christianity share much, each tradition has obviously grown off in its own direction. As Larry Kushner puts it, "The mere fact that we began in the same neighborhood does not mean that we therefore know all about each other. What we originally shared, when viewed through the lens of centuries, has come to mean often radically different things. Jews find the usually well-intentioned Christian borrowing of Jewish religious practices, such as a seder meal or lighting a Chanukah menorah as unintelligible and even offensive. It would be equivalent for Jews to say, "Oh yes, we love - Christianity - we do our own little Eucharist too!" Religions are like spouses: they want all of you and don't countenance sharing you with anyone else.

But we still share far more in common than we realize. We worship the same God. We see authority and spiritual enrichment from the same book, the Hebrew Bible. We both accept the moral principles of the Torah, we both agree that the humanly irreconcilable difference between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the entire world. Christians know and serve God through Jesus Christ and the Christian tradition. We Jews know and serve God through Torah and the Jewish tradition. That difference will not be settled by one community insisting that it has interpreted Scripture more accurately than the other, nor by exercising physical or political power over the other.

We also share a commitment to work together for justice and peace. Jews and Christians recognize the unredeemed state of the world as reflected in the persistence of persecution, human degradation, poverty, and misery.

Speaking of peace and justice, I would be remiss if I did not comment on the horrendous situation in the Middle East. When will peace and justice come there? That's a tough call. The Palestinian and Islamic view of Israel is that the entire land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea, and not just the West Bank, is a religious Waqf, an Islamic religious trust. According to this dominant Islamic view, any Muslim who relinquishes any part of Israel is damned to hell, the ultimate destruction of Israel is a certainty, and future generations must complete the war.

So when will peace and justice come to Israel? I remain hopeful that peace with the Palestinian people can come, and will come, once they have been persuaded that the Jewish people cannot and will not be driven out of their homeland. Twice in the last century, the Palestinian leadership was offered a state, this time, Arafat was offered 97% of the West Bank, all of Gaza, East Jerusalem too, and he didn't even make a counteroffer. He unleashed the masses to declare Jihad on Israel, and now the Palestinian radio station is calling Jews pigs and monkeys, as suicide bombers target children.

Let me close with something that happened during THIS year in Israel you may not have heard about, something that happened during this year in which there were bombings, and sneak attacks, and many acts of murder on the roads. Do you know that even in this year, 45,000 Jews came to Israel from the former Soviet Union and more also came to Israel from Ethiopia?

These Jews came because even though the United Nations meeting in Durban dared to desecrate the English language by calling Israel racist...Israel was willing to take in black Jews from Ethiopia this year. No African state was willing to take in a single person from Ethiopia, even though the people there are suffering from drought. Israel did. You should know that not one European state was willing to take in a single person from Ethiopia, even though the people there are starving. Israel did. You should know that none of the countries that went to Durban and voted to call Israel racist was willing to take in a single person from Ethiopia. Israel did. And this, in the midst of a war!

My sermon today is entitled, "Jews and Christians, The Bigger Picture," for a very simple reason. Jew and Christians ultimately have the same challenge and goal: to find God's presence in this world and then act in such a way as to help others find it too.