



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## **Rabbi Jesus in the Gospel of John**

**By The Rev. Sharon Gracen**

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I had the lovely opportunity to have a conversation with one of my favorite people this week, my theology professor Clark Williamson. You have heard his name before, because he is a very resourceful reference. My time as his student was a seminal part of making me the priest that I am today, and I was grateful that today's Gospel immediately made me want to reach out to him. It's a difficult reading, and Clark was invaluable in helping me make useful sense of it.

First a little background. Clark studied with one of the great theologians of the 20th century, Paul Tillich. I always take that as license to consider myself Tillich's theological granddaughter. Clark taught us theology through several lenses--the perspectives of Tillich, the field of process theology, and most importantly for purposes of today's Gospel, Clark's worldview as a post-Holocaust Christian theologian. Throughout his career, Clark has sought to promote the important relationship and dialogue between Christians and the Jewish people. Their history together has not been a peaceful one, and certainly not a happy one for the Jews. In his seminal work, *A Guest in the House of Israel*, Clark wrote that "anti-Judaism is an inherited ideology of which Christians tend to be unconscious until it is brought to their attention."

In the Gospel of John, the term "the Jews" appears regularly, and it is not used as a term of endearment or praise. Whenever I stand in your midst and read such a text, I struggle, because it does seem that there is a sharp point at the end of all these references to the "Jews", especially since it appears so often. In fact, the term "the Jews" is used only 5 or 6 times in each of the other Gospels, but 71 times in John. There is clearly an agenda here and we would be well served to at least try to understand it.

For many modern scholars, John is considered to be blaringly anti-Jewish, but the whole situation that he is writing about is very complex, and not easily reduced to that simple of a point of view. Having studied with Clark and become sensitized to how the characterization of the Jews in the Gospels, especially John's, have been interpreted for centuries by Christians, I cannot leave it unchallenged. We need to be vigilant and careful as we hear these texts. Historic anti-Jewish prejudice has led to some unspeakable atrocities. So let's begin by looking at how John talks about "the Jews."

Without a doubt, it seems that some strange things come out of Jesus' mouth in this Gospel. In the 8th chapter there is a dreadful exchange with "the Jews." Jesus says to them, "If God were your father, you would love me; why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil and your will is do

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your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth because there is no truth in him." This section is never read as a part of our lectionary cycle, so we might just pretend that it isn't there. But it is there, and it has encouraged anti-Semitism by those who have failed to appreciate the full context of what was going on.

Given that Jesus was himself a good and loyal Jew, it makes sense to dig a little deeper, in order to understand why the Gospel was written this way. First, the historical context. We must always remember that all of the earliest Christians were Jews and represented a distinct movement within Judaism. The development of The Way, as it was called, coincided with destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem itself. Thousands of Jews were killed. The circumstances were dire, and as the Jews once again struggled to survive, the growing presence of Jesus' followers created even more conflict within the whole landscape of Judaism. These circumstances led to an outright schism, in which various communities emerged, like the one John was writing to, that no longer considered themselves Jewish.

So here we find ourselves at the crux of the reason that John's reference to "the Jews" seems to be so full of antipathy. In essence, John appears to take the opportunity generated by the schism to promote a new theology of replacement, whereby God's covenant with the Jews is replaced by the new covenant, whereby only those who believe in Jesus become the "Children of God". Jesus becomes the new temple; Jewish images, like the shepherd, the Passover lamb, the word, the way, and even name for God, I Am, are now used to refer to Jesus. This is a radical new position that cuts the Jews out of the picture--and God's Grace in particular--even as it unnecessarily separates Christians from Jews.

A second context for the apparent animosity towards the Jews in John's Gospel comes from Jesus' historical circumstance and relationship to the Pharisees, who are most often cast as his antagonists. In today's Gospel reading, the Pharisees do not even believe that the man had really been blind. They regularly challenge Jesus and try to trip him up, always testing him. What most Christians don't know is that there were two different schools of thought within the Pharisees. They followed different teachers--Rabbi Shammai and Rabbi Hillel, who were both alive and in Jerusalem during Jesus' time.

The Shammai Pharisees were the majority. They were concerned with the survival of the Jewish people and believed that that would best be accomplished by being separate and maintaining a strict interpretation of the law. They could be called fundamentalists in today's vernacular, and the history of Judaism has not remembered them kindly.

Rabbi Hillel, on the other hand, is considered one of the wisest Jews, and there is a clear connection between his teachings and those of Jesus. Rabbi Hillel's greatest themes were peace and non-violence, love of neighbor as oneself, and what we call the Golden Rule. He said, "do not do to others what you would not have done to you." Was Jesus a follower? One could draw such a conclusion, for much of what Jesus proclaimed had already been taught by Hillel.

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The tension between the followers of Shammai and Hillel was considerable, so it seems entirely likely that when Jesus is depicted calling "the Jews" hypocrites, or blind and stubborn, he might well be referring to "those Pharisees" within the Shammai school. Several prominent scholars, including Albert Schweitzer, believed that Jesus was a follower, indeed a disciple, of Hillel, which would make him also a Pharisee. So you see that the historical context is complicated, and certainly it is not easy to know exactly which group of people John's Gospel refers to so often as "the Jews".

What is not complicated is our responsibility today. The history of Christian persecution of Jews and the use of scripture to justify it is our shame. So we must be mindful when we read scripture and hear "the Jews" cast in such an apparently negative light. As with many situations in the Bible, John's Gospel carries an unacknowledged back story. Even when we read later in John's Gospel about Jesus' death, the Roman hand in it, and the role of "the Jews" who cried out for his crucifixion, we should continue to remind ourselves that those "Jews" probably just represented a small group of the Temple leadership who owed their jobs to Pilate. Yet even today you hear Christians inveighing against Jews in general because of their supposed complicity in Jesus' death.

So let John's Gospel serve as a reminder to read the Bible and think about the contexts and back stories. Let it serve as a reminder to make important distinctions and not assume that references like "the Jews" means all Jews, across every period in time. And let it serve as a reminder to listen carefully to how groups talk about one another. Our political discourse today sounds a lot like the way the Jews are portrayed in John; blind, hypocrites, liars, those who reject the truth. We do not need to fall into such traps. Every situation has an important explanation that accompanies it, and every apparent opponent is still a Child of God. The message of love, self-giving love, is the way forward, it is the way of peace as taught by Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Jesus. And it is for you to teach as well; for just as Jesus learned it from Hillel and taught it to us, we have learned it from Jesus and must teach it to others. It is part of our leaned inheritance--just like what Clark learned from Tillich and passed on to me, I learned from Clark and share with you. May we all be good stewards of this inheritance.

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