

August 17, 2008
Matt. 15:22-28
Romans 11:1-32

GRAFTED IN

I visited the Holy Land a couple of years ago with a class while I was in Seminary. It was an experience that I hope everyone will have some day because there is something truly awesome—in the very theological meaning of the word—about being in that place where Jesus lived. About walking where Jesus walked. It was a spiritual experience, but it was also just plain fun.

The part of modern Israel called the Holy Land is a very diverse place in a lot of ways. In the winter, when I was there, the climate is very similar to ours here. Israel in general is a modern country with a strong economy and, I was very relieved to find, nice hotels for the throngs of tourists who go there. There are lots of tour companies that specialize in taking groups of Christians to see the Biblical sights, but it is a popular spot for all kinds of adventurous tourists.

Everywhere you go in the Holy Land you encounter people trying to make a living by catering to tourists. Every time the bus stops, even if it is at an unplanned overlook or just a place where your tour guide knows they have decent bathrooms, people appear who want to sell you something. Cheap jewelry, little carved camels, canvass tote bags, yarmulkes, it goes on and on. Plus, everywhere you go there is a gift shop selling more of the same.

All of the street vendors and the one-man shop owners are Arabs. When they encounter a busload of Christian tourists, they are all always Christians, but you suspect that that is not the case when they go home.

In the part of Jerusalem they call the Old City, where you can walk the route that Jesus probably took when he carried the cross to Calvary, there are four distinct sections. The Jewish section, the Palestinian section, the Christian section, and the Armenian section, which is a distinct ethnic group that is predominantly Christian. Christians are present but a very small minority in Israel.

Now between the Christian and Jewish sections, you have to know the borders to know when you have crossed from one to the other. But when you cross into the Palestinian area, you know immediately. Actually, this is true all over the Holy Land, not just in the City. The whole environment changes. The Jewish areas are clean and the people are prosperous.

In the Palestinian sections, there are stray dogs and litter in the streets. And children running around with ragged clothes, sometimes begging, but they get shoed away by the adults trying to sell you stuff.

I have to say I bought a lot of stuff in the Holy Land. I still have a box of trinkets that I couldn't even give away as gifts. But I was acutely aware of my status as a privileged American in that troubled area of the world, and I had a hard time saying no to those vendors.

But what I really wanted to buy while I was there was a decent souvenir t-shirt. There were lots of t-shirt shops, but you never saw so many really tacky t-shirts in your life. I'm not just talking about your standard "My Grandma went to the Holy Land and all I got was this lousy t-shirt." That one I admit I've always thought is kind of cute. The worst one was so bad, I almost don't even want to describe it – but I have to. It has a picture of a hand-rolled cigarette with a smoke plume and it says, "I got stoned in the Holy Land."

I found one t-shirt that I would wear myself and even that, I had to struggle with a little. It has this symbol that is on the cover of our Bulletin and underneath it, it says “Grafted In Romans 11.”

Supposedly, this symbol has been found on several second century artifacts and it suggests a thriving Jewish-Christian community in the area at that time. This is significant because most scholars think that by the second century, there was no identifiable Jewish-Christian Church. At any rate, the symbol does imply at least a degree of tolerance and relationship between some early Christians and Jews.

Now, the letter to the Roman Church can get pretty convoluted, and our passage today from Chapter 11 is a good example of it, but whatever else might be going on in Paul’s mind, he is definitely telling his Gentile followers You are not superior to the Jews or favored by God over them. As a matter of fact, theirs is the elite line. Anyone who considers himself a child of God is either born Jewish or has been grafted into the family tree by the saving act of Jesus Christ. Either you are fortunate to be born one of the chosen people or you become one by the grace of God.

Paul wants to be very clear about this. One of my resources says that the very heart of the Paul’s letter to the Romans is a warning against Gentile-Christian arrogance. There was no new species of tree come into existence when Christ died and rose again. God did not destroy the existing tree and replace it. Because, as Paul says, “the gifts of God are irrevocable.”

And aren’t we all glad of that. Where would we be if God changed his mind about grace?

So, I am proud to wear my grafted in T-shirt. I want to make a statement—that as a Christian, I claim my Jewish heritage. I am proud to call myself Jewish. I hope that some Christian who harbors feelings of anti-

Semitism might be awakened to the error of his ways. And I am proud to let Jewish people know that I am not one of those anti-Semites.

There is just one problem with this pride of mine. Maybe to Jewish people it is a little presumptuous. Maybe they don't really think Christians are entitled to claim any identity of heritage with them. Maybe they have good reasons to reject what they might see as a condescending, too little too late attempt to just sweep aside the centuries of suffering that Jewish people around the world have felt at the hands of a dominant Christian society. Maybe I can't blame them for that.

Prejudice, bigotry, racism. They are terrible things. We all know that in our hearts. That is why we really don't like hearing it coming out of Jesus' mouth the way we hear it in the Gospel lesson today. That kind of talk just does not fit with everything we know and love about Jesus. Jesus tells us over and over that we are no better than anyone else and that if we are to follow him then we must love all of God's children, regardless of who they are. How do you square that teaching with his insult to the Canaanite woman?

And let's not make bones about it. It was a very insulting comment. Scholars who have understood how inconsistent it is with the compassionate Jesus we have come to know have tried to soft-pedal it. Someone said, "well, he really meant it as a term of endearment—he did use the word for a lap-dog, for a little dog, so it's like calling her a puppy, which is more like calling her a kitten in our culture." Well, that would be nice, but it can't be justified under any kind of scholarly examination. Calling someone a dog was a major insult in that culture and that is what he called her.

But then, look what happened when she called him on it. She basically said, “well I am what I am, that doesn’t mean it’s ok for you Son of God to ignore me.”

And he didn’t get defensive, or angry or feel the need to put her in her place. He actually laughed I think and said you’re right. Good for you.

It wasn’t so long ago—in the lifetime of most of us here—that Christians supported racial segregation—not just in schools but in churches. We look back a little further when the majority of Christian churches in this country supported slavery and we wonder how could it have been?

And we sometimes take comfort in the fact that we aren’t like that now. Discrimination is illegal and for many of us the fact that our church is not more diverse racially and ethnically is a cause of great concern.

We know that bigotry is wrong and we wonder how it could have happened. But we are not superior to our predecessors any more than those first century Gentile Christians were superior to the Jews. Because I suspect there are very few of us who are not harboring some kind of bias.

When my parents told all their friends in Minneapolis Minnesota that they were moving to Tallahassee Florida in 1953, nobody said “how wonderful, I wish we could live in Florida.” Instead, they were warned about how backwards the south was. The racism was a problem, but the schools and the health care were terrible. Really, their friends acted like they were going off to live in South America somewhere.

So, my parents were very intentional about teaching us that all people are created equal and that racial prejudice was wrong. They were not the strictest parents for that era, but there was one thing we knew would not be tolerated in our house was any kind of racial slur or even stereotyping. I was quite surprised when I was in high school and I figured out that my father

who was in the infantry in WWII believed that all Germans were at heart anti-Semitic Nazi sympathizers. He was prejudiced against an ethnic group that he believed was prejudiced.

It's hard for me to even tell that story about him because he was such a good person. His ethics and integrity were beyond reproach. But he was human and his experience in the War had led him to those conclusions. But he always treated everyone he met with graciousness and I remember a deeply troubled German graduate student who he took under his wing and who for the rest of her life considered him a person she could count on to care about her.

But think about how many prejudices there are. My parents' liberal friends were prejudiced against southerners. In the course of being judgmental about them for their prejudice, I made a crack about South American culture. I know 4th generation Irish American Catholics who are prejudiced against Irish Protestants. I don't know any Irish American Protestants, or I could probably say the same thing about them.

Prejudice is everywhere. The fact that we often are not even aware of it may make it even more damaging than it was in the days when it was acceptable.

When I was in the Holy Land, our group had an incredible tour guide. Because tourism is such an important industry in Israel, tour guides are highly educated professionals. Avi was Jewish but he knew more about the New Testament than our whole busload of Christian seminary students and professors all together. He also knew all about the Hebrew Bible and about Islam, He called himself a non-religious Jew, but he showed more compassion and enlightenment regarding the Palestinians than any religious person I have met. He lives with the hope that one day Israelis and

Palestinians will live side by side in peace and he believes the key to that dream is education.

One day we were visiting a shrine to John the Baptist built by some Byzantine monks in the 8th century on the site of a cave where they believed John the Baptist was born. I know, John the Baptist wasn't born in a cave, but that is a whole other story. A group of Israeli school children were there on a field trip and after they toured the church, their teacher, a young man, sat them down on the steps and was talking to them. Avi listened for a minute and smiled and said he is teaching them about Christianity.

And I thought wouldn't it be nice if our children learned about Christianity in school. Then I thought, wouldn't it be even nicer if they learned about Christianity and Judaism and Islam and Buddhism. Because if you understand something, you are much less likely to fear it.

Education is the key. I thank my Dad for instilling that in me above all else. We fear and distrust what we don't know or understand. Fortunately for us, we at Fellowship Presbyterian Church appreciate the importance of education and we understand that it is a lifelong process. So, our worship service this morning includes a commissioning of our Sunday School Teachers and all of you who are leaders of circles and squares because you are all about serving all of us as we learn and grow in our life with Jesus Christ.

We are going to commission our teachers in a moment. First we are going to sing a favorite Sunday School song. I have to tell you a little story about a one of the most respected theologians of the 20th century named Karl Barth.