

Cesky-Tesin - Church talk - September 20, 2009 - Dr. Walter Ziffer

Good Morning, my friends.

Thank you, Pastor Wojnar, for inviting me and my colleague Dr. Mullinax, to speak at this church. It is a pleasure and an honor to do so.

I would like to begin by reading a few texts from the Bible.

From the Book of Leviticus (Treti Mojzisoiva) 19:16

In Hebrew the text reads: *lo ta'amod 'al dam re'akha*. This our rabbis translate as: "Do not stand idly (*necinny* ?) by the blood of your neighbor," and

verse 19:18b - *ale budes milovat sveho blizniho jako sebe sameho. Ja jsem hospodin.*,

These words are later repeated by Jesus himself in the Gospels.

Gospel according to Luke 10:25-37 - Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to test, saying, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" he said to him, "What is written in the law (Torah)?" How do you read?" And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have answered right; do this and you will live."

But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half-dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, "Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back. Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed mercy on him." And Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

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This text is, as you all know, the famous Parable of the Good Samaritan. It is a very beautiful teaching text that we have from the mouth of Jesus. It is a typically Jewish text - a text very similar to various Jewish rabbinic texts we know. This makes perfect sense, of course, because Jesus was a Jew and a rabbi.

Let me now make a few comments concerning this text as a Jewish scholar, in the context of the Reconciliation Conference that is taking place in our town.

Point 1.

What does this Parable of Jesus teach us? Its main lesson is that the official status of a person and that person's inner disposition do not always correspond to each other.

In the 1st century in which Jesus lived, the Temple priesthood held a supreme position, great influence and power, over the ordinary day-to-day and religious lives of the people. The priesthood in the Second Temple period was very prestigious. So also was the status of the Levites who occupied the second highest rank in the Jewish religious hierarchy.

We also know that the Temple functionaries obtained their religious status by inheritance.

The honored positions were passed on from father to son within the Levitical tribe.

Furthermore, we know also that the Temple functionaries were corrupt - even despicably so. Not only does the New Testament make this clear but we hear this also from the writings of Josephus, the Jewish Roman historian and from some of the rabbinic texts, as well.

So then, what does this Parable of Jesus teach? It teaches us that the men who occupied the high Second Temple positions, the priests and the Levites, in Jesus' times, were not men of integrity and of honor. Their high official status and prestige did not go hand-in-hand with goodness, holiness, honesty and love... Quite often it is the lowly and the despised; those who have no voice in society; those who are looked down upon, that possess these high virtues that God desires of human beings.

The Priest and the Levite ignored the dying man at the roadside. The hated Samaritan, a man occupying one of the lowest rungs on the social ladder, did not only see the half-dead person and gave him first aid, but also brought him to an inn, there to be taken care of.

Point 2.

While this is a Parable that Jesus told in the hope of teaching the Scribe and those standing near by about God's requirements of all human beings, it is in a way also a foretelling about Jesus' own future.

For the half dead man at the roadside foreshadows the fate of the very Jewish teacher, *yeshua' ha-notzriy* - Jesus of Nazareth, who tells the Parable. It is he himself who will fall into the hands of criminals, in this case the Roman government and the corrupt Second Temple officials. This same Jesus, an innocent man and great teacher, will be eventually imprisoned, publicly beaten and crucified and, just like the poor man in the Parable, ignored by the passers-by and left to his fate. Jesus was not as lucky as the robbed and beaten man in the Parable who was pitied by at least one person, cared for, and prevented from dying. And, remember (!), the death of Jesus is not a Parable but an historical event.

Point 3.

The conference we have been attending is a Reconciliation Conference, intended to remember the tragedy of the Jewish people, hunted down, imprisoned, and murdered, only a few decades ago in this country and in this town and in many other parts of Europe..

In this connection let us remember that Adolf Hitler did not invent antisemitism. That ugly phenomenon had been existing for many centuries. During the Crusades initiated by the Church in the Middle Ages, tens of thousands of Jews were murdered in the name of Christ; in the Inquisition in Spain alone, 40,000 Jews, men, women and children, were murdered. On the basis of the most reliable statistics, these 40,000 Jews were burned alive then by the Church in the name of Christ; during many centuries thousands of Jews lost their lives accused of the Blood Libel - Christian senseless and preposterous accusations that Jews steal and murder young Christian children just before Passover, bleed them to death and use their blood in the preparation of the unleavened bread that they eat on that religious holiday; hundreds of thousands of Jews over the centuries were murdered in Pogroms, anti-Jewish violent outbreaks and bloodshed in Eastern Europe and Russia, the last of which took place in the Polish city of Kielce, on July 4, 1946, after the Holocaust, mind you! Pope John Paul II publicly personally apologized for that murderous incident while visiting Jerusalem.

We, today, in this city, remember and mourn just short of thousand Jewish persons, deported by the Nazis on June 21, 1942 and murdered within the following twenty-four hours in

Oswiencim/Auschwitz.....

You may by now have asked yourselves, “While all this is true and deplorable, what does it have to do with the Parable of the Good Samaritan?”

Well, it has everything to do with that Parable because that half dead man by the roadside is, in addition to being a symbol of Jesus, abandoned on the cross, also the symbol of Jesus’ Jewish brothers and sisters who, some 70 years ago, were robbed, beaten, tortured and finally murdered, by the Nazis. As with the dying man in the Parable - as with their Jewish brother Jesus dying on the cross - also these Jews’ tortures and sufferings were ignored. There were Christian people all around us with open eyes who did not wish to see us in our agony and did not wish to acknowledge our suffering. And so these innocent Jews went to their death: not one, not hundreds, not thousands, not ten thousands but 6 million, 1 ½ million of these children.

This is how twelve of my family members perished, uncles, aunts, cousins, all from this town, without any word of support, hope or love given to them by our own town’s people. In my family’s case, only one woman from Banska Bystrica, who was my mother’s helper whom my sister and I dearly loved, had the courage to come to our assistance. She offered to safeguard some of my parents’ most cherished belongings and when we returned to Cesky-Tesin from the concentration camps, returned to us every single item she had securely kept out of the thieving hands of the Nazis.

By means of the simple and exquisite Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus explains to the Scribe what it means to be a real neighbor. Ever since I read this Parable for the first time, I have been wondering why our friends and acquaintances, here in this town, failed to be our real neighbors when we were in dire straits. Could it have been that a long ago acquired antisemitism kept them from helping us?

Why was it that after the Nazis had occupied our city, noone wanted to be seen with us? Why was it that people crossed to the other side of the street so as not to have to say “hello” to us, Jews? Why was it that the farmers on the market did not want to sell their produce to us? I could go on...

I fully realize, my friends, that your parents and grandparents were also endangered by the SS. I fully realize, my friends, that your parents and grandparents, too, were afraid of what the next day might bring in terms of arrest, torture and possible death. I, with my own eyes, saw on two occasions a truckload of Christian priests and pastors, guarded by the SS, driven out of our town. I do not know what happened to them. I do not know whether any of them survived. This was a hellish time for all of us - I know that.

Yet, I also, along with you, heard the texts, from the Old and New Testaments.

“Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.”

And Jesus’ words, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

We cannot proclaim these truths, teach them to our children and grandchildren and then, when we see a single man or woman or a group of innocent people, Jewish or non-Jewish, driven to torture and death, not act upon them.

We must not, as Jews or Christians, remain bystanders when we see others suffering and dying by the hands of cruel persecutors. We must never ignore the suffering of others!

We cannot even rightfully call ourselves Christians, followers of Christ, - and Jews, followers of the teachings of the Torah, the Prophets and our Sages, - if we are not ready to put the sacred words we teach others, into action ourselves.

I have long ago discovered - and I firmly believe - that the word LOVE is really a verb and not a noun, because LOVE is something we must DO.

And so Jesus' final question to the Scribe, in the Parable, continues to speak to us across the centuries even today. His question is urgent and demands a response from us:

“Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?”

To this we respond, “The one who showed mercy on him.”

And Jesus responds to us with God's word, in this hour, “Go and do likewise.”

Amen.