

Practicing Jews, Practicing Christians

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Exodus 12:1-14; Romans 13:8-14; St. Matthew 18:15-20

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost – September 4, 2011

A phrase that was often used a number of years ago, was this, “Practicing Jews, Believing Christians.” This phrase seemed to convey the thought that to be a Jew, one had to do all the right things, that is to obey the Law. One had to observe Shabbat Shalom on Friday evening, keep the Sabbath all day Saturday, restrict the number of steps taken even to the synagogue, keep the Kosher diet, refrain from any inappropriate work, and wear the expected “tell-tale-ing” garments. For the Christian, particularly the Protestant, the only defining expectation was “to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.” Therefore, the phrase “Practicing Jews, and Believing Christians” took all kinds of ill-conceived criticisms and saccharin simplicities.

In the Exodus scripture today, one of the defining acts of being a practicing Jew is clearly articulated. Let me refresh your minds, “This month is to be the first month of the year for you...on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, (if the family is too small for a lamb, than share it with a neighbor); your lamb must be a healthy male, one year old; actually you can choose a sheep or goat. Keep it penned until the fourteenth day of this month, then slaughter it...at dusk. Take some of the blood and smear it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the house where you eat...You are to eat the meat, roasted in the fire, that night along with the bread made without yeast, and bitter herbs. Don’t eat any of it raw or boiled in water...and don’t leave any of it till morning. Leftovers should be burned in the fire.” As the scripture goes on to say, “This is a memorial day for you; you will celebrate it as a festival to God through the generations, a fixed festival celebration to be observed always. (*The Message; Eugene Peterson, p. 123*).

At the outset of this discussion we must clearly understand that in Judaism, narrative and observance go hand in hand. That is, religious devotion is demonstrated by “keeping close” to the narrative that keeps us in the right frame of mind, the right context of thinking and acting. For the practicing Jew to remember that he or she has been delivered from bondage or captivity, whatever

that may be, and whether it be inwardly or outwardly, one needs to do things to keep the memory of Israel's deliverance by God from Egypt in the forefront of the mind and heart. One authority puts it this way. "Though sometimes evaluated negatively by Christians, faithful maintenance of the law (in this case the ritual meal of roasted lamb), is not a means of securing deliverance, but rather a grateful response to a God who is always saving us from bondage. (*The Lectionary Commentary; The Old Testament and Acts; Gary A. Anderson, p. 85*) In other words the Jews understand that to be able to function as a good person, "good understood as the adjective for God, God's person," one must keep the narrative of God's working in our lives ever present. The Jews understood that this was not possible with only sporadic thoughts, occasional worship moments, hinting comments at lectures or speeches. The Jews understood that there needed to be a regular re-formation, a holy re-enactment if you will, a specific mode of keeping believers in commonality with each other. Hence the observance of Passover with all its specifics is meant to honor the gracious hand of an all-merciful God, and to allow anyone present to be part of that spiritual gift.

This, my friends, is fundamentally at the foundation of our experience with the Eucharist over and over again. You will notice that I did not call the experience of receiving bread and wine in the name of Jesus as communion. For today, I want us to understand that the word Eucharist, coming from the Greek, means intense thanksgiving to the point of seeing Jesus' all consuming love for us on both the cross and in the resurrection. What is meant for us in these moments of remembering with specific words, joyous singing, standing or kneeling postures, elevated speech, holy metaphors, gestures of breaking and lifting, is to capture in us the living spirit of God in fullest measure. Eucharist is not a tag along to the sermon. Eucharist is not a dessert to a service of prayers, music and spoken word. Eucharist is the coming again to our very hearts and souls of the essence of a loving Savior and a resurrected King. We are given in the present, which is the only moment we can live, the very Spirit of God that makes us One with the Giver of Life.

Practicing Jews. Their Bible tells them how to keep at one with El Shaddai. And how to hold their worship in a place that preserves the past historical events that have knitted them to Jehovah, these three being, the deliverance at the Sea of Reeds or Red Sea, the revelation of the law at Sinai, what we name as the giving of the Ten Commandments and thirdly, Israel's adoption as God's very own holy and special people, called to bring all the nations to the One God of creation.

Practicing Christians. Our Bible tells us how to keep at one with Jesus the Christ. Our Bible tells us that his death and resurrection must be at the heart of all our thinking and acting, for they empower us to be His Body in the world to do His Will. Our Bible shows us that we must cling to the Eucharist and its holy ability to make us into sisters and brothers of the One we name as the Son of God, in the present moment.

As almost postscripts to this word, I remind us that Paul's words in Romans 13, affirm the above truth and asks for our singular allegiance to Christ's commands. He writes, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law...put on the Lord Jesus Christ."

And Jesus himself in the Gospel lesson in Matthew today, a passage that seeks to teach us how to be more resolved in being at one with each other, makes this well quoted statement. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, (gathered around my Eucharist gift), I am there among them."

Believing Jews-not enough. Believing Christians- not enough.

Practicing Jews and practicing Christians- the right place to start and the right place to stay. So, let's labor on, on this Labor Sunday. Amen.