

On Sunday, October 28<sup>th</sup>, as I sat in Temple Beth Tzedek during a vigil service for hope and healing, following the horrific massacre in Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh on October 27<sup>th</sup>, I was struck, as I have been at other times in similar contexts, that people like me are the greatest threat to Jews in our society. I've seen statistics that say anti-Semitic hate crimes have increased substantially in our country in the last year. Overwhelmingly the perpetrators of those crimes share my skin color (white) and identify with my faith (Christian).

I've been a Presbyterian pastor for nearly 30 years, and over those years I've come to believe that anti-Semitism is Christianity's original sin. Even though our founder was a Jew and by all evidence a very devout Jew, whose recorded words never rejected his faith; and even though the earliest Christian writer, Paul, was also a Jew and never renounced his faith but understood Jesus as the pathway for Gentiles to be grafted into the Jewish family, still our faith is steeped in anti-Semitism.

How could this happen? For the first three centuries of the Common Era Jews and Christians shared a common adversary in the Roman government. Both groups were viewed with suspicion; both at various times were expelled from Rome. Archeological evidence offers examples of Jews and Christians living peacefully together in villages throughout the Roman Empire. But in the 4<sup>th</sup> century the Emperor Constantine established Christianity as the official religion and from that time on crimes against Jews by the Church began systematically through confiscation of property, ghettoizing, forced conversions, expulsions and pogroms.

Nothing in our scripture justifies or validates such actions, yet century upon century, through schisms and reformations, anti-Semitism persists. Is it the result of our literalizing the passion stories in our gospels? Is it a misapplication of Jewish scripture identifying Jesus with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah? Is it our inherent need to have an enemy to pit ourselves against, or just our lust for power? Whatever the cause, we must root out and eradicate anti-Semitism from our faith. It is a stain on Christianity.

Doing that means letting go of many cherished beliefs and practices. It means re-writing our hymns and revising our prayers. It means rejecting the view that the only valid path for knowing God is through Jesus Christ and all others are inferior. Above all it means renouncing the belief that Christianity is the fulfillment of, and thereby replacement for, Judaism. We must stop trying to "win the world for Christ," and be about practicing the compassion we learn from Christ in the world alongside our sisters and brothers of other faith communities.

Pastor William Hennessy  
North Presbyterian Church  
300 N. Forest Rd.  
Williamsville, NY 14221