

“Hard Sayings of Jesus”

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Text: Matthew 5:21-37

I stood at the brunch table, with food all around me. Women wearing hijabs smiled at my collar as they offered me more salad. I was at the local mosque in Tennessee. A student had just gone on a shooting rampage, and there were some people who said it was because the man was Muslim and they responded with bigotry.

Now, white Christian men shot people in the city, and no one had ever held every Christian responsible for their actions. The shooter was not a terrorist. There was no hint of that ideology in his past, but that didn't stop people from painting with a wide brush, and the Islamophobia was spreading in our town. We needed to do something.

So, the progressive religious leaders—the rabbis, imams, priests, and ministers—did what we do best in those situations. We began to lean on our relationships that we had built among one another. We held prayer vigils with each other. We visited the mosque. We ate with one another. We invited the media. The president of the Jewish synagogue was the head of the Children's Museum. He organized an exhibit of Muslim culture. When people began to protest it, we organized our Sunday schools to visit. We tried to learn from each other's traditions, so that we could teach our children in our communities that there is more than one way to make sense out of life, in the hopes that the bigotry would not spill over into the next generation.

Ecumenical Christians learned to do these things after World War II. At that time, quietly something important happened that would shift international politics for the next 70 years. In response to the Holocaust, Christian and Jewish leaders began to build relationships with one another. We began to listen to one another. Christians began to study Jewish texts in our seminaries and Christian scholarship began to shift. We began to recognize and repent of the anti-Semitism inherent in much of our theology, and we began to change.

First Presbyterian was on the forefront of much of this important Interfaith work. Since the beginning of this church, you have had a history of working with the World Council of Churches, reaching out and building up these relationships.

After the events of 9/11, Ecumenical leaders kicked into gear again. I was in Louisiana, and we held adult education forums, where we invited women Muslim scholars to teach us and answer our questions. We began to work with the mosques on a deeper level. When I moved to DC, we participated in an Interfaith Unity Walk.

Interfaith work seems very ordinary most of the time. It's a matter of eating one another's food, going to prayer services, visiting sacred spaces, and reading scripture together. Other than the

friendships that come out of it, sometimes it feels a little bit tedious and pointless—until a shooting happens in a synagogue, or there is a Muslim ban. Then, religious leaders begin to reach out to lean on those relationships. While we eat at one another's tables, we listen to each other's fears, learning one another's perspectives. Over each bite of food, we try to get beyond the bigotry that we have been fed.

And all of this small talk over cold lunches has a huge effect—a global, political effect. For just as religion is often used to start wars and increase hatred amongst us, it can also be one of the greatest tools for us to understand one another, and to promote peace.

As we look at other religions, we can also understand our own faith a bit better. Take this morning's passage, for instance. Jesus has some really difficult sayings here, and it's always been hard to know what to do with them. Jesus is a Jewish Rabbi, teaching on the Torah, but he is making everything much stricter. The Torah says to not kill, but Jesus says that we should not hate. The Torah says that we should not commit adultery, but Jesus says that we should not lust. I often preach a Jesus of love, mercy, and grace. What do we do with these hard sayings?

This all confounded me, until I listened to Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish scholar who is one of these Interfaith heroes. When she was a little girl, she was riding the school bus, when the child sitting next to her said, "You killed Jesus."

Amy-Jill Levine was stunned, because she was pretty sure that she had not killed anyone. By the time she had gotten off the bus, she was also in tears.

Now, *Dr. Levine* studies the New Testament and helps Christians to understand when we are perpetuating anti-Semitism.

Levine explained the concept of "building a fence around the Torah." This is what Jesus is doing here. It's a simple concept. For instance, if you have a pool and small children in the neighborhood, then you build a fence around your pool, to keep children safe. If they can't get in the yard, then they won't fall in the pool before they can swim.

In the same way, if you're tempted to have an affair with someone in the office, and there is a way that you can avoid him, if there is a way you can keep from looking at him, then it's probably best that you do that. You're building a fence around the situation.

Another hard saying here has to do with divorce. Jesus is harsh on divorce, and it's difficult to get our minds around that. But his views on divorce have a lot to do with how marriage was set up in Ancient Rome. Girls were married at about 12 years old. Boys were older. They had arranged marriages, which the parents set up. There was a dowry involved. Then, if a man didn't like his wife any longer, he could just get a divorce. He had to return the dowry to her father, but it was a very easy process. And it could leave the wife destitute. Women in the ancient world often could not own property or their own assets. Money would be transferred from a father to a husband to a son. So, if a woman was divorced, then she could be left with nothing. (Now, it does seem like Jewish communities and early Christians were beginning to buck the ownership laws. We have rich women with property who are funding Jesus' ministry and the early church.)

Another interesting thing in this passage has to do with Jesus' prohibition against looking at a woman. I kind of rolled my eyes a bit, thinking, "Yeah... women are chattel. They have no agency here. Their only good for looking at."

But as I dug deeper into marriage rituals of Roman society, I realized that if a woman was caught having an affair, she could be divorced or even stoned. But if a man was caught, then it didn't count. No one in Roman society thought about it. Except for Jesus. He not only stood by a woman who was about to be stoned for adultery and defended her, but he also held men accountable for their actions.

Why is all of this important to us today? I think it's important for a number of reasons. First, people often use the words of Jesus to keep women in oppressive marriages. Women are often told not to leave their abusive husbands, without realizing that Jesus' words were actually protecting women.

(This is personal for me. When I was growing up in a violent home, our church taught that women should never divorce, even when there was violence.)

Second, it's important to remember our relationship with Jewish Law. We follow a Rabbi, who loved the Torah so much that he built a fence around it.

Finally, it's a good reminder that we need to keep building Interfaith relations. Jesus says we should not kill. In fact, we should not hate. And that extends to people in other religions.

Our present circumstances demand robust interfaith relationships. I worry that the decline in Ecumenical Institutions, our historic liberal denominations, and the World Council of Churches, has had a devastating effect on our society. For as these institutions these were committed to peace and Interfaith dialogue have declined, religious intolerance has increased.

In the last 45 years, armed conflicts that have been inspired by religious intolerance have been on the rise. In 1975, global religious issue conflicts were almost at zero. By 2015, there were over 30 armed conflicts. The spike in religious violence affects every religious tradition.¹ "According to Pew, in 2018 [more than a quarter](#) of the world's countries experienced a high incidence of hostilities motivated by religious hatred, mob violence related to religion, terrorism, and harassment of women for violating religious codes."²

Hostilities against Muslims and Jews increase across Europe.³ Buddhists are persecuting Muslims and Christians in Myanmar.⁴ Anti-Semitic crimes have been on the rise around our country. In 2018, a gunman entered a synagogue in Pittsburgh, he shot 11 congregants and

¹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/02/how-should-faith-communities-halt-the-rise-in-religious-violence/>

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/06/21/key-findings-on-the-global-rise-in-religious-restrictions/>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/26/opinion/antisemitism-europe-germany.html>

⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/burma>
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/myanmar-persecutes-christians-too-1544138518>

wounded 6 others.⁵ In New York City, hate crimes against Jewish people have jumped up 21 percent in the past year. And just weeks ago, a man stabbed five people in a Rabbi's home during a Hanukkah party.⁶

Jesus took the Torah seriously when he said, you shall not hate, and it is important in our time to take Jesus' words seriously. We must renew our commitment to Interfaith work. That means sitting around tables, eating with one another, working with one another, learning from one another, and listening to one another. That means supporting the Interfaith marriages in our midst. That means helping children of interfaith marriages appreciate and honor both of their traditions.

Jesus spoke difficult words, and sometimes we don't know what to do with them. But as we listen to one another, as we grow into greater understanding, we can begin to walk in his ways.

To the glory of God our Creator, God our Liberator, and God our Nurturer. Amen.

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/us/active-shooter-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting.html>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/28/nyregion/monsey-synagogue-stabbing-anti-semitic.html>