

HEY JUDE

Over thirty years ago, The Beatles had a song about “Hey Jude” – back when lots of young people (now middle-aged) thought The Beatles were the new messiah. In case any of you wonder, the Jude of that song has nothing to do with the Jude who wrote the second-to-last book in our Bible. Actually, I am told that song was written to comfort the young son of John (also not the biblical John), who was divorcing his wife. The boy was devastated, and as it turned out, it was the beginning of the breakup of The Beatles as well. That may have a lot more to do with the concerns of the biblical Jude than anybody ever noticed, then or now. But I will let you track that, if you care.

Many years and generations ago, a man calling himself Jude wrote a general letter to the churches which appears in our Bible just prior to the Book of Revelation. It is relatively short. I just read the entire contents for our Scripture Reading this morning. That is the good news, for some of you: Jude is short. The bad news is that I will be preaching about it all during August. Some of you may get tired of it, but I already know that I shall not. In fact, the details and the drama behind this “letter” go far beyond what we will have time for in five Sundays.

Anyway, we just read the entire Book of Jude, but if you are like me, you didn’t get it all in one reading. My suspicion is that many of you don’t remember ever hearing about this Jude character before. If you read it, as some of you must have, it did not register very deeply. Depending on the mood you’re in, it can go right on past, sort of like when your parents were giving you advice when you were a teenager.

Why five Sundays on one obscure book? Only in a liberal church could I get away with calling any biblical writing “obscure.” In any case, unless you are in a really good study group, we are always in too much of a hurry with everything in the Bible. We rejoice, and rightly so, at the possibilities the modern world makes available to us. Speed means we can cover vast distances in a single day – we can contemplate endless issues and concerns from anywhere on our globe on a single day. In one day, you can be in Jerusalem or Istanbul or Sidney or Vienna. Not long ago, the same journey would have taken months.

I just drove down here from the state of Washington. I stay pretty close to the speed limits, so it takes me about twenty hours of driving. A hundred years ago, it would have taken most people at least three months to get from Seattle to Los Angeles over land. It still crosses my mind, as I drive: How much do I learn about the people, the towns, the churches – the problems, and hopes, and dreams of the people I am driving by? There is life, full spectrum, going on all around me, all along the way. And though I have driven through it twenty times now since I first came here, I know nothing of it. Speed is a wonderful thing. It saves me from so much pathos, involvement, caring, and heartache as I whiz by. And how much meaning and learning and love does it steal from me in return?

Of course, if we remember, we can slow down once we arrive. We can move faster to spend more time where we really want to be. But speed is insidious. It can become a “way of life” – an approach to life that stays with us all the time. See more, know less. Speed plays havoc with our prayer lives. Speed is involved in nearly all the mental and physical health issues of our time. Our tradition has been warning us for two thousand years that speed is one of Satan’s favorite tools – not just moving fast, but the principle of haste: A way of life that is in too much of a hurry. No patience. No calm. No trust. No peace. *“They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.”* Some people pray all their lives and never ever wait long enough to hear the Spirit’s response. They do not have time or patience enough to wait for the dialogue – to listen for a reply. Then they go around saying asinine things to malign God’s love and care, like, “Be careful what you pray for ...” Or, “Sometimes God just says *no.*”

So the world is moving by us at a screaming pace, and we have so many important matters to decide. Do we approve of the latest Supreme Court nominee? Do we still like the President? How shall we conduct the affairs of Afghanistan, or treat Iran and North Korea? Is China a future friend or our greatest threat? Will the economy continue to plummet? Who will win the pennant this year? Who has time for God? Who has time to deal with the issues of being faithful in their own life, and right now? And now I want you to slow down enough to contemplate this ancient letter from somebody named Jude ... for a whole month? Glad we got that cleared up.

We don't have any other writing from this Jude, except what you heard this morning. By the principles of "publish or perish," Jude barely squeaks through. Apart from Jesus, it is obvious that none of us would ever have heard of Jude. Even *with* Jesus, some of you will tell me you have never heard of him. Put it a different way: But for Jesus, this letter would never have gotten into the New Testament because there would not have *been* any New Testament. So the sermon title, "Hey Jude," just means: Who are you? Let's get acquainted. Where do you come from? What do you care about, and why? Quite clearly, if you appear as the author of a New Testament writing, the Christian community thinks you have something tremendously important to say, and they have come to see what you wrote as extremely helpful. Naturally, as Christians, we do not want to miss that.

Hey Jude, who are you? And where do you fit in the picture and drama of the early church? And what is it that you are so concerned and eager to tell us?

Jude is a very familiar and common name in New Testament times. That's not surprising, since the Hebrew form of the name is Judah, and one of the sons of Jacob – hence one of the twelve tribes of Israel (alias Jacob) – is called Judah. Judah is the tribal territory in which Jerusalem lies. So when the civil war split the nation after the death of Solomon, the Southern Kingdom was called Judah. "The great lion of Judah" was a phrase to thrill patriots. Indeed, Judah was always the last bastion to fall, and the holiest place of all because that was where the temple was.

In any case, if you called Jude by his Hebrew name, it was Judah. If you translate Judah into Greek, it's Judas. In English form, we say Jude. The frequency of the name is illustrated by the fact that two of Jesus' twelve disciples are named Judas – Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot. For obvious reasons, it's important to distinguish between these two men. So in Luke and Acts, the first is called Judas, son of James, and in Matthew 10:3 and Mark 3:18 he is called Thaddaeus. It would have saved confusion if Luke had also called him Thaddaeus – more confusion than you know, since some still claim that "son of James" can be translated "brother of James," thus contending that the author of the Book of Jude is Thaddaeus. It's a stretch, but those who do not want to think about Jesus having brothers find it compelling.

Have I lost you, or did you just let your mind wander? We are wondering who wrote this letter from Jude. Jesus had two disciples and

one brother named Jude. Judas Iscariot cannot be the author – he died young and few have mourned his passing, though I suspect that Jesus did. That leaves Jude the son of James, and Jude the brother of James, who was also the brother of Jesus.

Hey Jude, who are you? Are you the brother or the disciple? Or, as I cannot help but suspect, are you a second-generation Christian who writes in honor of the brother of Jesus, hoping thereby to get a better hearing for a message you think is crucial for the health of the church, and for the well-being of Christians everywhere? This I suspect by content, language, and presentation. But you need not go there with me. A scholar as renowned as William Barclay, looking at all the possibilities, still concludes that the author is Jude the brother of Jesus.

While we are this close, a detail only a few of you will care about: If you conclude that Jude was the brother of Jesus, you probably also conclude that Second Peter was written by the Apostle Peter. There is a close connection between Jude and Second Peter (Second Peter borrowing theme and material from Jude, more likely than the other way around). That dates the writing of Jude somewhere in the mid-60s A.D. (if both were written before Peter's death). Those who think Second Peter and Jude were written by later Christians in honor of former leaders would date Jude closer to 150 A.D. It doesn't matter, of course, because, as everybody knows, it doesn't matter who is speaking (or writing), only what they are saying. Nor does the context out of which they speak make any difference, since truth is timeless. And if you can swallow either of these last two statements, you probably belong in some other, nearby church.

The puzzle is intriguing, but we can never be sure. Nevertheless, it leaves us wondering about Jude the brother of Jesus. Do you ever wonder about the brothers of Jesus? This is not any opinion or theory from me, it's straight out of our earliest Gospel: *"Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?"* (Mark 6:3) *"Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?"* (Matthew 13:55) Hey Jude, there you are – one of Jesus' younger brothers.

What would it have been like to be one of Jesus' brothers? I get no hint from the Book of Jude. Actually, I have a very big complaint about that! If this is indeed Jude the brother, why doesn't he talk to us about Jesus? He can tell us about the problems of the church later, but if this is a man who grew up with Jesus, what a tragedy to have a source so close and get not one word to help us fill in our picture of the most important man who ever lived. Hey Jude, thanks a lot! One brief, often scathing treatise, and not one personal word about your brother?

I am not trying to conclude from mere silence. Maybe in person Jude talked a lot about Jesus and felt there was no reason to write it in a letter. Doubtless he thought the world would soon end, and there was no need for such information to those of us who would be hungry for it so many generations later. Why did Jude call himself the brother of James, but not mention that he was also the brother of Jesus? James had become head of the Jerusalem church and, as such, was institutionally the most prominent Christian alive at the time. Many suggest that Jude, like James in *his* letter, was too humble to parade his relationship with Jesus too openly. Humility might well have been mixed with shame, since the biological brothers were no part of Jesus' mission while He was alive. What few comments we have suggest that the family tried to shut Jesus down, was afraid for Him, or thought He was off the deep end. And John's cryptic comment still rings in our ears: "*For even his own brothers did not believe in him.*" (John 7:3-5; Matthew 12:46-49; Mark 3:31-33)

The information suggests that while James was the next oldest brother, Jude was last or second to last. He may not have been old enough to understand much of what was going on when Jesus was alive. He may have formed his opinions by what the rest of his family was thinking and feeling. And what about sibling rivalry? We would like to assume that with somebody like Jesus, relationships with the brothers would have been ideal. Is Jesus not the quintessential source of the demands and expectations we have about "brotherly love"? Yet the few comments we have from New Testament accounts do not give us any reason to suppose harmony and peace in Jesus' family, or a closeness between Jesus and His brothers – never mind any loyalty, understanding, support, or belief. What of Jesus' own comment, "*and a man's foes will be those of his own household*"? (Matthew 10:36) Where did *that* come from? If Jesus was perfect, should He not have had perfect family relationships? How sad that Jesus had to deal with

misunderstandings, disagreements, lack of support, and all the other marks of our broken world – just like we do. It’s hard to grow up, isn’t it? But I’m going to try it, just as soon as I get a few more things organized ...

In any case, one more time the realism of the Bible corrects our desires to believe that if we are just faithful and good, everything will be easy. Faith is its own reward. If we want a different reward, we must walk a different path. Most around us do.

If this author was Jude the brother, he had stories to tell. And we don’t get to hear them in this life. What was it like for him as events moved on and the light shifted? What must it have been like for *any* of the brothers, as their kooky, off-the-wall elder sibling got into more and more hot water? In all likelihood, Jesus had been the provider, the surrogate father to the family, the eldest male (Joseph seems to have died young) while they were growing up. But then suddenly, when the rest of the siblings were able to take care of themselves, off He went into some completely loony Never-Never Land – jousting with windmills and misleading a few gullible peasants. Anybody with a shred of common sense would know that His course had to collide with the chosen and responsible leaders of the time. How embarrassing! How shameful for the family. And how much pathos for Mary, and for whatever natural affection and concern they all must have had for Jesus under all their consternation.

But then the real drama unfolds. What was it like for the brothers as their awareness of who Jesus was began to change? In all likelihood, Jesus was already murdered by the time this began to register on their consciousness. In the sorrow and the shock, perhaps they began to talk with and get to know the real followers in a different way and on a different level. What would it have been like to slowly, but with ever more certainty, come to realize that this strange, wondrous, uncompromising brother had been living with a mission and purpose far beyond anything you had dreamed of – that He had impacted other people in ways profound beyond anything you had imagined? Until finally, in some personal encounters with His Living Spirit, you yourself had come to realize that He was indeed the Messiah: that despite everything, He still loved you and wanted you to be in the Kingdom He had lived for all along – the Kingdom He had died for. If in the end these brothers became leaders and apostles too, then Jesus had revealed Himself to them after the

Resurrection – just like He does to us. (I Corinthians 15:7 says straight out that He appeared to James.)

You think I'm merely speaking of ancient history? Some of us can identify with the reluctant brothers far more poignantly than that. We did not all come to be His followers easily, or without reluctance, or as early as we wish we had.

Even so, we never hear from Simon or Joses. Even Jesus doesn't bat a thousand, at least not in this world. But for James and Jude, it was the beginning of a new life – just like it is for us. How then do they respond? How can they get into the Christian community they had once scorned, or at least avoided, and what role can they play when they get there? Once again, ancient history threatens to blur with our own personal biography.

How many times Jude must have been asked: "Where were you? What was it like growing up with Him? What part did you play?" And what could he say? "Well, actually, I didn't do much. I was too young. He was too busy. I didn't really know what was going on. It was only later that I realized what He had done for me, how much He loved me, how much He had cared all along. And finally it was like the scales began to fall from my eyes, and I began to see who He really was."

Some of us also awaken to the realization that He has done more for us than we once realized. Formerly we were not grateful, or appreciative, or aware in any adequate way at all. And now, how do we get back "in"? We are shy; we are embarrassed. Is it too late? Who are we? For the truth is, nobody can start to comprehend who Jesus is without confronting all the connecting questions and awakenings about "Who am I?"

Hey Jude: All this time about who you are, and we have said almost nothing about what you wrote. No time now, until next week. Except maybe for the opening: "*Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, to those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ: May mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you.*" (Jude 1:1-2) There it is; never mind my opinions, or all the details.

Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James.

Whoever he is, those are his credentials – the only ones he needs or wants. Jude, a *doulos* of Jesus Christ. My translation renders this Greek word as “servant.” The translators do not want to give offense, I suppose. They think we will not be able to handle it straight. *Doulos* does not mean servant, it means SLAVE. Of course, a slave serves and, in that sense, is also a servant. But this phrase means that Jude’s life is no longer his own. He cannot change Masters at whim. His obedience has gone far beyond that now.

Quite obviously, this slavery is not an overt or worldly affair. It cannot be forced on Jude, nor on any of us, from the outside. Nor can any earthly institution or authority impose or maintain it. Jude claims it. Jude takes this title of his own free will. Jude is a slave of Jesus Christ because he wants to be. There is more meaning and freedom and purpose and delight in being a slave of Jesus Christ than in any other life Jude knows about. Nobody can make him say this. He *claims* it. He has gone from brother to slave of Jesus Christ. That is, in fact (if you can accept it), why he claims to be the brother of James but not of Jesus. He has moved, by choice and on purpose, to a new relationship with Jesus. From brother to slave. You perhaps think this is a reduction, a blunder – and the translators agree with you. But Jude does not agree with you. There is no higher title or honor than knowing ourselves as the slaves of Jesus Christ. Living as brother or friend or consultant or partner can never touch it. Because Jesus is who He is, being His slave is the only way in the world to come into our own – to have our lives enhanced beyond anything our own wisdom or opinions or plans or strategies can match. But that is *after* we trust Him, *after* conversion, *after* surrender – after truly giving our lives and our wills over to His will and WAY.

Still, I am amazed at the brazen claim, the assurance, the matter-of-fact assertion of Jude: “*Jude, a slave of Jesus Christ.*” No qualms? He really is, and knows he is? Wow! Oh friends, that is what I want to be, what I hope I am – what I know I am not, at least not nearly as much as I long to be and try to be. “A slave of Jesus Christ.” That is what I want to be able to say.

Is that something you can say? Or want to be able to say? I am the slave of Jesus the Christ, my Savior and my Lord.

MORE ANGELS

We will start to move now from “Who is Jude?” to “What does Jude have to tell us?” His message has several layers, and they are all intertwined in this short treatise. Naturally I need to say everything all at once. But I cannot talk fast enough to do that. I have to break it down into sections, artificial as that will sometimes seem. The problem is, we do not understand the situation Jude was facing unless we do a bit of digging. Even then, some of it will be by deduction and guesswork. We do that all the time, of course. What’s really going on with our children? What did my wife (husband) actually mean by that remark? Is this undercurrent I feel at the office just my imagination? It’s endless. And when the hints and clues are two thousand years old? Well, in some ways, that’s easier because it’s no longer changing minute by minute. On the other hand, if we are going to end up concluding that Jude is telling us things still relevant today, we better try our best to understand what was going on when he wrote to us.

Today I want to tell you a bit about Jude’s rather surprising perspective – an approach that very nearly got him kicked out of the New Testament. That is, it nearly prevented him from getting included in the first place, and afterward some of our most influential leaders thought it was a bad mistake to call the Book of Jude canon scripture.

Here is the core of it: Jude mentions well-known stories and traditions from the Old Testament – the Exodus from Egypt; the story of Balaam; Korah’s rebellion. But he does not quote or directly refer to any of the accepted biblical writings. Surprisingly, he does take material from First Enoch, as if it were genuine biblical prophecy – that is, as if First Enoch were as authoritative as a biblical writing. He also mentions a dispute between the Archangel Michael and the Devil over who gets possession of Moses’ body. This non-biblical story comes from a writing known as “The Assumption of Moses,” a writing that has been lost to us, though several times it was mentioned by ancient sources. We think it may have been part of The Testament of Moses, a book which tells of Moses’ last instructions to Joshua just before he died. Only, The Testament of Moses breaks off in mid-sentence, and the remainder, which may have contained The Assumption of Moses, has never been found.

Back to the point. Jude relies on First Enoch and on The Assumption of Moses. Think about it: If you accept Jude into the New Testament canon, and Jude, as canon scripture, uses non-canonical writings as authoritative, that sets precedent of enormous proportions. It means there are important writings outside the Bible! The borders suddenly got thin and cannot keep truth in – or out. We suddenly jump from an orthodox bastion of certainty ... to a far more human effort to search, to want to know, to try to understand what's going on. If Jude is canon scripture and Jude uses non-canonical sources as authoritative, then how do we know where all the legends and mythology end and the truth begins? Indeed, none of you would accept a good deal of the material in First Enoch as historical, factual, or accurate. Yet from the Bible *itself* we have precedent for not considering the Bible to be the only source of truth.

Now, you may have missed this little earthquake, but earlier Christians did not. Bede the Venerable (673-735 A.D.) was still trying to fathom it. Talking about the Book of Jude, he writes:

The Book of Enoch, from which this quotation is taken, belongs to the Apocrypha, not because the sayings of that prophet are of no value or because they are false but because the book which circulates under his name was not really written by him but was put out by someone else who used his name. For if it were genuine, it would not contain anything contrary to sound doctrine. But as a matter of fact it contains any number of incredible things about giants, who had angels instead of men as fathers, and which are clearly lies. Indeed, it was precisely because Jude quotes him that for a long time his letter was rejected by many as being uncanonical. Nevertheless it deserves to be included in the canon because of its author, its antiquity, and the way in which it has been used, and particularly because this passage which Jude takes from Enoch is not in itself apocryphal or dubious but is rather notable for the clarity with which it testifies to the true light.

If you had trouble with Bede's double talk: He claims that Enoch was a great prophet but that the book bearing his name was written by a scurrilous liar; however, Jude somehow managed to glean from this

wretched book a kernel containing the pure essence of truth and light. Therefore, all is well.

Possibly Bede thought he had cleared it all up. But the more I read what he said, the more I cannot tell whether he was pedaling forward or backward. In any case, it is no modern theory or realization that there are a lot of ancient manuscripts which were not written by the person the manuscript claims wrote them – and that some of these writings do not contain the unvarnished truth. Just to keep it more complicated, it is now clear that pseudonymous books – that is, a book written in honor of a famous person, or as if that famous person had written it – were not considered wrong or deceitful in ancient times. It may be that the designation was given in humility and with appreciation for the person named. In any case, between thirteen and fifteen of our twenty-seven New Testament books were not written by the person who seems to be the author. That does not imply that the people who wrote these books were silly or unfaithful or any the less worth reading. And all the other authors whose names we do know – are they perfect? Do they ever make mistakes? Do we really live in a world where some people do not make *any* mistakes?

We are, I hope, incredibly grateful for those who labored to bring us the Message. And especially for those who did it so well that the Christian community ended up approving of their writings so much that they were put in a collection of writings called canon scripture – the Bible. I keep on reading them, including Jude. But unlike some of my friends, I am not under obligation to believe everything they say. I *am* under obligation to listen to and obey whatever the Holy Spirit makes clear to me – including what reaches mind, heart, and soul when I am reading the Bible.

Augustine (354-430 A.D.), three hundred years before Bede, was also troubled by the Book of Jude, but I think he stays more honest: “Does not the canonical epistle of Jude the apostle openly declare that Enoch spoke as a prophet? It is true that his alleged writings have never been accepted as authoritative, either by Jews or Christians, but that is because their extreme antiquity makes us afraid of handing out as authentic works those which may be forgeries.” (*The City of God*, 18:38)

For Augustine, the man Enoch was of great antiquity, being in the seventh generation from Creation – son of Jared, and father of Methuselah. But Augustine does not trust the book which bears his name. Augustine

leaves it at that, and doesn't try to explain why the Book of Jude is in the Bible or why Jude quotes from First Enoch. What Augustine could not have known was that First Enoch was part of the growing apocalyptic movement between the testaments – written between 200 and 100 B.C., not between 6000 and 5000 B.C. Life had gone from bad to impossible, and First Enoch declares clearly, and generations before the birth of Jesus, that God will send a Messiah to save us. This Messiah has always existed, waiting for the proper time – glorious in power, and righteous beyond all the sin and evil of this world. It was a theme dear to the early Christians, and is still dear to every Christian who hates the suffering and evil in this world. But some of us have a slightly different expectation than what was pictured in apocalyptic scenes of 150 B.C. And we are still arguing about whether Jesus was “apocalyptic” and saw Himself as a Messiah like the one pictured in First Enoch. Nevertheless, Jude saw Him that way: the fulfillment of the Messianic expectation that was rampant in the first and second centuries *before* Jesus was born.

I, of course, would claim that Jude was wrong on this point. I am not a literalist, nor does inerrancy make any sense to me on any level. It is the make-believe of the frightened. Well, sometimes I am one of the frightened, but making up theories about how we cannot be wrong about anything does not comfort me. Jesus is the Messiah, and is far beyond anything imagined in First Enoch, but He really lived, and was not just imagined on paper. That is what comforts me!

So I do not imagine that Jude was right about everything, nor is that why I consider his writing so valuable. I like to know what he was thinking, and I realize that to some degree he reflects the perspective and beliefs of the early church. But where he gets valuable for me is when he tells us about the church, how it should live, and what he expects it to be like. We will get to that in the weeks ahead. But today we are mostly into the opinions and beliefs that Jude held, which I presume most of you do not share. Not only do I refrain from urging you to believe everything the way Jude believed it, I profoundly hope that you have very different understandings of what Creation is like and how things work here. We need to know where Jude was coming from, but that does not imply agreement. Had I lived when Jude lived, I would very likely have agreed with him on such matters. But that is no longer our world. Nor can *my* theology fit into the flat, two-dimensional constructs that Jude, through no fault of his own, held as a man in his own age.

From comments in Genesis 6:1-4, First Enoch develops a theology of fallen angels who consort with earth women (producing offspring who are giants) and who do much evil on earth. The evil is not just the lust; First Enoch seems even more concerned that the fallen angels are instructing humans in the ways of forbidden science: They are teaching them how to make swords and knives, and how to make cosmetics (eye shadow is particularly offensive). They are teaching them how to make jewelry, and how to process precious metals. They are showing them how to make writing materials, and how to use pen and ink. They are teaching them the art of magical medicine, and how to use plants and roots. They are teaching them the principles of alchemy, and how to understand the cycles of sun and moon and stars. It is all part of the evil which comes from eating of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. This is all happening before the flood, you understand. Enoch is the grandfather of Noah. The flood, among other things, is what it takes to wipe out the race of giants that resulted from the angels mating with the daughters of men. The Book of Enoch says some of the giants were three hundred cubits in height. That is no dinky little Goliath. If a cubit is the length of a forearm, or about eighteen inches, then the giants were four hundred and fifty feet tall. And the stated problem is that it was impossible to keep them well fed, so they got hungry and turned mean. We love to tell scary stories, don't we? And that's okay – until people start confusing it with sound theology.

Now, if we were to take this as mythology and see the giants as symbolic of what happens when, in pride, we try to act like half-gods instead of like humans, then not being able to “feed” the giants of our lust for knowledge, wealth, and power might start to register again. Something about having a “tiger by the tail” – a variation on the story of the Tower of Babel. By the way, First Enoch seems particularly “modern” in its denunciation of sinners as economic exploiters, as political oppressors, as the *socially* unjust of the world.

Is Jude Jewish or Christian? Obviously he is a totally committed Christian, but what I mean is: Does he know and believe in Jesus as a very new and different sort of Messiah – the bringer of a very new and different truth to match the New WAY He invites us into? Because of Jesus, does Jude have a different expectation about God, about our Hope, about the nature and purpose of Heaven? Is Jesus truly the Savior, or does Jude think Jesus will save us by showing us yet again that Judaism was right all along: That we will be saved when we all

behave in righteousness, and according to God's laws. And that Jesus will come to right all the wrongs – kill off all the bad guys, and reward all the good guys – and we will have peace and joy at last because there will be no more evil. (Evil is only on the outside anyway, don't you know?) And that the Messiah is strong enough, and righteous enough, to finally get rid of all our enemies.

I was just wondering: Is Jude Jewish or Christian? Clearly he knows the stories of the Messiah that were told one hundred and fifty years before Jesus was born. They had it all figured out – what God was going to do and how God was going to do it – long before anybody had known Jesus, and long before anybody had experienced or known anything about the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, or Pentecost. In fact, most people are still reading and understanding the Book of Revelation as if it were just another First Enoch – second verse, same as the first. The coming of Jesus Christ – His life and death and resurrection – has not made one iota of difference in what we think the methods and motives of God are, or what we expect is going to happen? We had it all figured out before He came, and by God nobody is going to sell us any newfangled ideas about grace or transformation, or about gospel or love or new chances. Kill all the bastards, throw 'em in the Lake of Fire, and let's get on with the harps or whatever.

I should mention, I suppose, that in Jude's day, there was a growing movement within the church which believed that the church needed to separate itself altogether from Judaism. More of that next week, but some of Jude's approaches were his way of insisting that Christianity was thoroughly steeped in Jewish roots – in Jewish traditions and writings. That may have been why he went to First Enoch and The Assumption of Moses – to remind everybody about our Jewish connections. Doubtless it never crossed his mind that some who read his letter would no longer believe that science was evil, or that the angels were screwing our women, or that the Devil would try to claim Moses' body on the grounds that the physical was evil and only the spirit was worthy to go on. (Jude disagreed with this, of course, and, believing in the physical resurrection, he was reminding everybody that Michael was sent to rescue Moses' body from Satan and take it to Heaven.)

So anyway, Jude has all these opinions about fallen angels and about how evil is creeping back into the church. He assumes that all the true followers, if reminded, will see things in the same way he does.

Then they will band together and kick all the bad guys out of the church. Therefore much of his letter is describing what happened in the past when people were not faithful. He uses Jewish stories and history as an object lesson to threaten members of the current church with dire punishments if they do not stay faithful – meaning, right and righteous. And I suspect he means right and righteous *behavior*. When I talk about staying faithful, I mean TRUST: trusting God – trusting Jesus – for love, mercy, forgiveness, guidance ... and a future I cannot see. If you want to talk about the old variety of right and righteous, I'm out of here! I thank God every day that there is no justice, at least not by the old definitions. I wouldn't last ten seconds if we were going to go back to standards of perfection – standards of "justice" as that word is usually used and defined. If you want to talk about "the just shall live by faith" and by that you mean trusting in God's love for us, then that is a different matter. But that is the New Covenant, not like the Old Covenant.

We are talking about Jude, and I have a lot of appreciation for him, as you may yet discover in coming Sundays. But if Jude was the brother of Jesus, then I also need to say that one of us does not understand his brother. I don't think James understood his brother either. James and Jude may have ended up believing that Jesus was the Messiah, but they meant the old apocalyptic kind of Messiah. They never "got it." At least it doesn't sound like it from reading what they wrote. Jesus was too mind-bendingly new! Too far beyond all their traditions and expectations. At least that is my conclusion. They may have missed and loved their brother; they may have found a way back into the church He started; they may have tried to be as helpful and faithful as they knew how to be. But I think they never switched over to the Gospel. They were still "Law Men." And if that is true, then they were a greater threat to the Christian church they tried to serve than the very enemies they tried to warn the church against. For if you take the church away from the Gospel and back to the Law, that will destroy it more surely than all of us sinners with all of our flaws and errors and mistakes all put together. As long as grace flows, and as long as we trust Him and not ourselves, there is still hope for community, growth, repentance, forgiveness. We cannot make a mistake so big that Jesus cannot fix it. But if we go back to righteousness, and judgment, and who is deserving, and how much good do we have to do to earn our way into the Kingdom or into His love and approval, then all is lost – all love is pretense, and all hope is laced with fear and guilt too heavy to bear.

Look around you. Are you sitting in the midst of a perfect people? Will you be shocked and horrified – and will it dash your faith in Jesus and your expectations for the church – if somebody here makes a bad mistake? Or does something really selfish? Or does something that brings evil or destruction in its wake? I have reminded you, from time to time, that we are a fellowship of sinners. The well have no need of a physician, as Jesus said. And the righteous have no need of a Savior. But we are not just a fellowship of sinners. We are a fellowship of *forgiven* sinners. Even more to the point, we are a fellowship of *repentant* sinners.

Somewhere between the old righteousness and the new grace, there is the possibility for being accepted and repentant sinners – those who are far from perfect, yet who know themselves already loved and blessed and guided. It is a strange, in-between place that Jesus has created for us, a place nobody ever imagined or heard of until He came. To this day, most people bounce back and forth between the extremes: We cannot imagine a place where we pretend nothing, yet we are in no way content to stay the way we are. On our own power and authority, we cannot stay in this new place; it requires a Savior – a Savior willing to stay with us, both personally and continually. On the other hand, we do have such a Savior.

Whether Jude realized this new realm or not, he will try to help us with the repentance part. What has been happening to the church is not okay with him. I hope by the end of next Sunday, it will not be okay with you either. Being an unforgiven sinner – an unrepentant sinner – is the antithesis of the Christian Life. Yet it is being taught everywhere in our time, even by the church itself: unconditional love. If you think you are lost, that no ONE cares about you, that no ONE can love you ... then you do not yet know the Savior. But if you are a sinner who does not repent, and who is not repentant on a daily basis ... then you also do not yet know the Savior.

Jude 1:1a, 3-4, 6-8, 12a, 17-21, 24-25

WHAT'S THE MATTER?

The enemy without is seldom as dangerous as the enemy within. That is why our world spends nearly all of its time, and most of its resources, struggling with externals. That way at least we do not have to focus on the most serious problems. It is comforting to pretend that all our problems are outside of us and perpetrated by other people or events. That way when we get angry at all that is going wrong, at least our anger can be directed toward others – elsewhere and outward.

It is true on all levels, of course. The threats and pressures from the society around us are a real and serious factor in every family's life and well-being. But how serious would they be if there were not so many internal factors also at work? Do more families fall apart from external problems than from lack of love, loyalty, appreciation, cooperation on the inside? When companies fail or barely stagger along, is it because the world is such a tough place and the competition so fierce? Surely anybody who has ever been part of an organization or corporation knows that the external problems, however tough, would be almost fun if the team could get it together – if all those within the organization would work together in trust, and for the mutual benefit of the company and each other.

Naturally the church is not immune to any of these principles. None of you have ever been part of a church where there has been no “fringe” – where everybody truly loved God, and willingly carried their share of the load. None of you have ever been part of a church where every member cared about the church's true purpose, or where every member lived their own personal life in honor of the precepts and teachings of our Lord. And I do not mean in some ethereal or perfect sense; I mean only to the degree that they themselves have been able to understand them. Always the personal agenda creeps in, and the pride gets hooked, and on our best days the power is cut by willfulness, disobedience, carelessness, rebelliousness, and a lack of consistent loyalty and love for our Lord. Something about a “broken world” ...

By the way, I am not suddenly unhappy with you or with this church. Not at all. This situation did not arise yesterday, or last week. It started back with Adam and Eve, and the fruit of that tree. I am just

trying to get us in step with Jude's remarks so we can better understand him. Jude is not addressing his letter to some specific place or town or to some particular congregation. His letter is to the church of his time "in general." Paul writes to specific congregations that he knows, and in most cases he was the one who started those churches (Romans is an exception). At least once he wrote to a particular individual named Philemon. But Jude belongs to what we call the "catholic epistles" – "catholic" meaning "universal." Jude hopes every church everywhere will get a copy and read his letter. I presume, therefore, that the problems Jude addresses are widespread and a threat to all the Christian churches, not just to one isolated congregation, in one specific location, with a unique troublemaker or group of troublemakers that most other churches do not have to deal with.

At the time Jude writes, then, there are widespread aberrations of the faith growing pretty much across the board in the Christian world. Even if we choose the latest probable date (150 A.D.), we have seven generations to go before Christianity becomes the acceptable religion of the Roman Empire. In short, there are plenty of pressures and problems on the outside. But Jude says nothing about these. He is worried about the threat from within. At first blush you might also think the Book of Revelation is worried about the enemy without. But not so. From John's perspective, there are plenty of pressures from without, and more coming, but that is not his big concern. He knows that if the people inside the church stay faithful, everything will come out fine. His real concern, not merely in his letters to the seven churches but throughout, is for the faithfulness of those inside the church.

How many churches across the land today believe that their biggest problem, or even their only problem, is that they do not have more members? About ninety percent. Well, I understand the feeling, but it is only a secondary problem. And it is never solved by thinking about what's wrong with all those people who are not coming. But fortunately only a handful of leaders think or care about it anyway (which is what is *really* wrong).

What can we discover from Jude's brief letter regarding the threat from within? There are people trying to lead the churches away from their basic faith and convictions. They have "wormed their way in." They are turning the freedom, grace, and forgiveness of Jesus into an excuse for licentiousness. And Jude is a bit scathing here: They have claimed

the *grace* of Jesus, while using their new freedom to act any way they want to. Thus they have actually rejected the One who brought this grace. They took the gift and rejected the Giver. And now they want the whole church to misuse this grace for purposes opposite to the meaning of both the gift and the Giver. Jude is not pleased with this new trend, or the people who represent it. And by the way, Jude probably got into the New Testament because the majority of people of the church realized that this letter was a clear and helpful warning about a serious problem. If this letter could help to defeat this new trend, then it belonged in the canon. And indeed Jude has helped to defeat this continued trend down through the ages.

The situation Jude is addressing is much too complex for a Sunday morning. On the other hand, Christians need to know this stuff. If I cannot get it clear, maybe I can at least get it started.

The story of the struggle for the right way to live is as old as human history itself. I have seen no indication that this struggle – maybe “warfare” would be more accurate – is any less poignant today than it has ever been. And the stakes are high in terms of human suffering; blighted lives; energy and resources wasted; people off-course, often leading to the destruction of self-image, love, family life, church, character ... and of course true spiritual development.

The church as the body of Christ’s followers on earth does not escape this struggle. It does not *create* this struggle, but neither can it escape it. How shall we live? In fact, how shall we live in order to honor and obey our Savior and Lord? Does the Christian Life we live in any way connect to and match the high truths we claim: dying to the old, and being raised to New Life – and now spending our lives in the presence of our Living Lord, who continues to comfort, guide, and inspire us every step of this Way, and every day? Especially if, as Jude claims, we are the willing slaves of Jesus Christ?

We feel Paul already struggling with these issues in the church’s infancy, especially in the Corinthian letters. The knife of Jesus Himself is so swift and sharp, we sometimes miss the struggle and see only the filleted remains. “*Bid my brother divide the inheritance with me*” (Luke 12:13) “*If you make love with a woman, the two of you are become one ... and the relationship either goes forward in love, or you are adulterers.*” (Matthew 19:5-9; Mark 10:7-12) “*Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more.*” (John 8:11)

In the early history of the church, this struggle for the right way to live is not cured but is revealed by the wars between the orthodoxy and the heresies. It is a fascinating story, seldom well told, but gaining attention in some circles today as people realize that these wars are not over. These issues keep circling back around, not always with the same names, but always with the same constructs – with the same principles at work.

By the end of the second century (200 A.D.), the fight was in full swing. It was focused between the orthognomoi (*orthodoxoi*) and the Gnostics. (The Right Thinkers versus Those Who Know It All.) There were, of course, various groups and expressions within each camp. The popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown reveals how hot the issues can still be today. But Brown and his ignorance aside, there are many sincere and highly intelligent, if less famous, proponents for various forms of Gnosticism in our own time.

Marcion, the first of the more influential heretics (he died around 160 A.D.), was no Dan Brown. He was an incredibly sincere, disciplined, devoted follower of Jesus. Moreover, his followers tended to be the samurai of the early church. When persecutions came and it was time to die for their Lord, the Marcionites were among the most stalwart. It is easy to love and admire Marcion, but that does not make him right. He tried to throw out all Judaism and Old Testament writings, urging his followers to concentrate on Paul's letters and an edited version of the Gospel of Luke. Focus and simplicity are always appealing, even if they lead us into untenable error. Nevertheless, this began a powerful but heretical claim, taken up by many other groups after the Marcionites were discredited. (By the third century, most Marcionite groups had been absorbed into Manichaeism, a later heresy.) Marcion taught that the Christian Gospel was totally a Gospel of Love, to the absolute exclusion of Law. You can see why he was called a heretic and thrown out of the church at Rome. Marcion believed that the Old Testament God was cruel and contradictory and had no connection with Jesus. He believed that Jesus came to reveal a different and much higher God of love – a God beyond and much greater than the Creator of the physical realms of evil and sin. Marcion thought that Paul was the only one who understood Jesus' true Message, the rest of the disciples being too blinded by their Jewish roots. The Gospel of Luke (Luke was a disciple of Paul) was better than the other Gospels, but Marcion had to edit Luke to weed out the

Jewish errors. And of course, it was the Old Testament God who was behind the crucifixion of Jesus.

Marcion was not a typical Gnostic, but some of his beliefs were then “developed” by later groups into a dualism which claimed that Spirit was good, and that matter – everything in the physical realm – was evil. The battle was between light and darkness – spirit and matter. Perhaps some of you are now picking up on the sermon title. More importantly, perhaps you can now hear and feel Jude struggling against the growing heresies of his time. His readers, of course, would have been aware of these issues. If we are not, we cannot hear Jude except dimly and vaguely.

If all physical matter is evil, then the Creator – the Old Testament God – must be evil too, since he brought the physical world into existence. Our only hope is to escape all matter, because that is what's the matter. Shades of Eastern religious beliefs, if you will pardon the pun. Indeed, many Gnostic groups (*Gnosis* = knowledge) saw the Old Testament and Jewish history and tradition as coming from the Demiurge – the evil Old Testament God. Therefore Jesus must be from a different, higher, more hidden God. And those endowed with true knowledge – and superior spiritual awareness – knew this and rose far above the common masses to true spiritual being ... until they saw themselves as being rather godlike. They were fulfilling the Christness within, though that is not the phrase they used back then.

In fact, they became so spirit-filled – so far beyond the body, the matter – that now they could have sex with anybody they wanted, any time they wanted, and it would not *matter*. Matter is only a fleeting aberration anyway. So what's the matter with that? Well, Jude did not like that more and more of the women of the church were getting picked off by this baloney – and the men too, of course.

You may think I'm getting carried away. In fact, the translators have tamed it way down again. In English, verse 17 says: “*These people create divisions; they are worldly and unspiritual.*” Yes, well, it says that, if you are watching carefully enough. But Jude is far more passionate than this sounds. He is throwing the language and teachings of the Gnostics back in their faces. He says they claim to be *pneumatikoi* – spirit-filled. But in fact they are *psuchikoi* – flesh-dominated. The Gnostics were claiming that the *pneumatikoi* were a higher form of life, capable of high knowledge and true spiritual experience. The *psuchikoi* were locked in to the low and physical, not much better than animals.

But Jude says the truth is just the reverse. “Don’t just listen to their pretty talk, look at how they live,” he pleads.

In verse 12, Jude is warning the churches of the dangers of their communion meal – what was most often called “the love-feast” in the early church, referring to Jesus’ love for us in giving Himself for us. But watch yourselves, Jude is saying. These people come to the table fellowship for a different purpose. They act all religious and friendly and interested in Christian love, but they are really there to see who they can pick up – who they can go to bed with. Worship can be a dangerous and vulnerable time, because people feel safe and trusting; if the preaching and the singing are good and the spirit is high – watch out for the matter. So be careful. These people are wolves in sheep’s clothing. Do not get picked off. For some reason, I was reminded of a phrase from *My Fair Lady*: “Oozing charm from every pore, he oiled his way around the floor” Of course, around here our worship is really tame and sedate, so you’re not in nearly as much danger.

Nevertheless, if you think such aberrations of the faith are confined to the early days of the Christian church, you are truly asleep. There are always proponents around for some advanced and highly evolved mystical teachings which turn out to be sick and sad excuses for lust and sexual misconduct, or one of the other Deadly Seven.

Back to the heresies: Gnosticism in various forms was based on superior knowledge, not on faith. Docetism (to pretend) claimed that Jesus only *pretended* to have a body, and did not really suffer or die on the Cross; He was too spiritual for that. The Cross was just an object lesson, a charade. What’s the matter with *that*?

Michael Green, in the Tyndale Commentary on Jude, quietly frames the summary of Jude’s conclusions about the false teachers of his time:

Physically, they became immoral.
Intellectually, they became arrogant.
Spiritually, they became disobedient to our Lord.

I hope nobody is able to write that on any of *our* tombstones!

Because the battle for how to live was serious and heated, and because writings like Jude and Second Peter were strong ammunition for orthodoxy (literally, right thinking), they were included in the New

Testament canon by those grateful for their clarity and perspective. Since I am one who needs constant reminding of how we are supposed to live, I am grateful for them too. But of course, some who most seriously need such reminders are not here today. They have become so spirit-filled that they no longer need the Body – at least not the body of Christ.

But we are not Gnostic. We still love and believe in the Creator who made this place where body, mind, and spirit all reside together. Where the Christ comes in the flesh – the Incarnate One. Where behavior matters, and what we believe wants to be expressed by matter.

Sadly, from my perspective, some traces of the Gnostic heresies became *orthodoxoi* for most Christians. Sex, in much of Christendom down through the ages, was seen as evil, tainted with the darkness of matter. And so the church has often taught that sex is a lot of what's the matter with human life. It is good to be the body of Christ until it's time to make love. So except for Luther and a few other oddballs, the church has been somewhere between shy and downright negative about sexuality. Many Christians have a hard time with gratitude, devotion, prayerfulness, and obedience when it comes to claiming sexuality as one of God's gifts of Life.

So many times we have gone from Jude's warnings – or from other teachings about right living – to conclusions which state or imply that the best solution would be abstinence. I am not trying to introduce sex education this late in a sermon. I just know that Jude's type of warnings are often taken to false conclusions. Sex is supposed to be a beautiful celebration of love, in marriage – in fact, like a communion meal – leading to intimacy, and forgiveness, and new starts, and great appreciation. The entire history of the world is huge evidence of how effective it is to try to stop sexual misconduct by claiming that sex is ugly, wrong, ungodly, or selfish. It *can* be all of those things. There is no gift of God that we cannot ruin. But if you want your children to have any courage or patience or understanding for “right living,” then you have to tell them how beautiful sex can be, and what it is really for – and how easily it can be ruined, and why it is worth waiting for the right context and the true purpose. Humans can be pretty disciplined, if they are clear about the hope – the beauty, and the meaning, and the purpose. Most of us are pretty rebellious with “just don't do it,” if that comes without any attempt to reveal why, or what we are waiting for.

WHAT'S THE MATTER?

In any case, Jude is saying: “Get real! We live in a physical world, and our spirituality must be seen in how we live here. Behavior matters. Judaism is our roots, and the Old Testament scriptures as well as Jewish tradition and writings are still the ground out of which we came. Being loyal to Jesus, and to His church, in the real world is how we express our faith and commitment. So we know what happened to those who would not follow the ways of faith and devotion in the past. Do we imagine it will come out any better for us if we abandon those precepts in *our* time?”

We will spend a bit of time next week with the traditions Jude wants to remind us about. But essentially he calls us to get back to taking care of business: Keep strong in the faith. Help each other. Whenever possible, rescue people from the influence of those who have soared off into some wild blue yonder that turns out to be just another version of a barnyard. They call it a celestial wonder and glory that only the privileged elite can fully fathom, but in reality it stinks.

I still think Jude is too light on the mercy, forgiveness, and new starts – in short, the Gospel. But it's there if we are aware enough to pick up the hints and phrases: *“And now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing – to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen.”*

Jude 1:1-2, 5-8, 11-13, 16, 19-21 (NASB)

THE BAD GUYS (The Adversaries)

And Jesus began to say to them, "Take heed that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray." (Mark 13:5-6)

Who is leading whom astray? It is a hard thought, but we can hardly read even this short letter from Jude without realizing that this is a major issue behind his concerns. This is not just my "take" on this. "Jude is concerned for the salvation of those to whom he is writing and is afraid that in their naiveté they might be seduced by false teachers." (*Commentary on Jude*, Theophylact (1050-1108), Archbishop of Ohrid, in what is now Bulgaria.)

Do you know that I worry and pray a lot about not leading you astray? Of course, in our Congregational tradition, some of the heat is taken off me because we assume that you study and think and pray yourselves and don't just take anything because I say it. But even some of you get lazy enough to let me do your thinking and believing for you. That's a no-no! As Paul says: "*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*" (Philippians 2:12) In much of the Christian world today, it is assumed that people are unfaithful, even enemies of Christ, unless they swallow whatever the priest, bishop, or preacher is telling them ... and swallow it pretty much undigested.

Others, to be sure, are in no danger at all of being misled. They are not *going* anywhere. Nobody can tell them anything or lead them anywhere. They think it will keep them "safe" if they refuse to commit to anything or participate in any form of the Christian Life and community. Of course, that means that if anybody is right, even Jesus Himself, then they are wrong. But many of them are quite certain that the Jesus they do not believe in – and know little about – will be duty-bound to forgive them.

Not only do I pray and study hard in the hope of not misleading you, but I assume that my perspective is flawed in places. Obviously I cannot tell where those places are or I would have corrected them. That "correcting" has been going on all my life, so I don't expect it to stop now. Nevertheless, I trust the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord to go on guiding,

correcting, forgiving, and sometimes even laughing with us when our foolishness comes to light. So I tell you the best I know, and trust you to take it from there. But most of you already know that.

I have spent these summer Sundays talking to you about Jude. Focusing on the Book of Jude is a wonderful study of a very serious and dedicated Christian of the early church, whose perspective is clearly flawed but who nevertheless reminds us of many important things. So as always, we try to wend our way through his truth and error, trying to learn what we can and discard what we must. The notion that there is or ever has been a clear and certain body of belief to which all Christians adhere is a total myth. It cannot be maintained by anyone who knows anything of our history. We are still writing systematic theologies! If one that has already been written is correct, why do we keep writing more and more of them? Why do books keep pouring off the presses, if everybody already knows the real and inerrant truth? Christian faith and belief are far too dynamic to be bottled, canned, or patented, and assembly-line approaches are false to the very principles of love and truth – as anybody who has ever been in love, or who has ever been called by Jesus, will testify.

Next week I will tell you some of the things I appreciate most from Jude. Today I must mention some of his comments which, though they may be interesting, I do not agree with. While my agreement is of small concern, I will tell you why Jesus would not agree with him either. That is not of small concern.

First of all, this fascinating comment from verse 5: Jesus saved a people out of the land of Egypt, and then destroyed those who did not believe. I understand the motive behind the claim. Jude cares about the church (which to him is still people – the people of Jesus), and he is very worried about what he considers to be wrong and evil trends making headway in the church. His motives are good. He wants to save people from error, and destruction. Good motives no longer impress me as much as they used to. Almost everybody has them, including some of my worst antagonists. People with good motives can even do pretty bad things – if they think it's serving a good cause or getting the right results, or at least the results they *think* are right.

Jude is a really good illustration of this very thing. He has made his point and now he will threaten anybody who does not agree with him: Jesus will punish and destroy you if you do not agree, just like He did

before – back when the Hebrews had just come out of Egypt with Moses. And Jude is going to list a number of punishment/destruction episodes to persuade or stun any opposition into accepting his perspective. By the way, it worked. Not perfectly, but quite well. My point is not that Jude was ineffective. It worked, and it is still working in terms of persuading people to be afraid enough to agree. The question is: Does this kind of fear – do these kinds of threats – work to build up the Kingdom, and bring people to a clearer and better relationship with Jesus Christ?

Many translations have switched to “Lord” or “God” in verse 5, because Jesus back at the time of Moses seems an anachronism. But many older manuscripts, and some very fine modern translations (English Standard Version), retain “Jesus” in this verse. It reminds us that in the early days of the church, there was no New Testament, and that the Bible for all early Christians was the Old Testament. Therefore, many of them read Jesus back into everything. And since the early church came to believe in the Preexistent Christ (*“In the beginning was the Word ...”* (John 1:1)), it was a simple step from there to thinking of Jesus as having always been present in all circumstances. By such logic, Moses may have been the actual leader at the time of the Exodus, but it was Jesus behind the scenes who was really in charge of what was going on. That perspective is well documented and defended in many Christian groups to this day. I am not trying to claim that this is despicable; I would point out, however, that it is endlessly confusing. If we thus “Christianize” the Old Testament, we can never hear it as Old Testament. The confusion is worst at the point of trying to understand what the coming of Jesus brought into the world. If Jesus was always and already here, then when Jesus of Nazareth showed up, it didn’t make any difference. It was just “same old, same old.” There was no contrast. We always expected the Messiah, and the prophecies had told us what He would be like – and it was, and is, all working out according to plan and prediction and predestination. No surprises.

Some people are very comforted by the thought that Old Testament prophecy told it all ahead of time. The less human choice there is – that is, the less free will – then the safer they feel, and the less chance there is for any of us to mess things up. I don’t know – it looks pretty messed up to me. It would be nice if I could believe none of it was our responsibility. But no free choice – and no responsibility for our choices – also means no meaning or purpose to any of it. What we like or dislike about philosophical theories probably doesn’t change the truth one whit. But it does change our perceptions of reality, and therefore our responses to it.

I would remind you that Jesus was a total surprise to everybody, and pretty much still is. Neither Judaism nor any Jews within it expected a Messiah anything like what Jesus was really like. They were even more surprised by how He went about His mission and ministry. Nor did anybody expect the Messiah to teach what Jesus taught, to believe as Jesus believed, or to die or rise again. We even had to invent a “Second Coming” to get things back on track and turn everything back around to what we wanted and expected in the first place: a Messiah who would massacre everybody who did not agree with Him, and who would take over and right all the wrongs and fix all the evil – so we wouldn’t have to be bothered with any spiritual growth or changes in ourselves. In short, if Jesus had been what Judaism expected, all the Jews would have believed in Him. Do I need to point out that this was not and is not the case?

Now Jude blithely claims that it was Jesus who saved the people out of Egypt, and then destroyed all those who didn’t get with the program. Moreover, He will destroy all of you, if you don’t get with the right beliefs and practices that I, Jude, am setting before you in this letter. Clearly that is his claim and message. Now, you may think it strange, as I do, that at the time Jude is writing, it has not yet occurred to him that a Messiah of grace, love, and the Cross might not act according to the blueprint worked out for Him in apocalyptic patterns generations before Jesus Himself was born. (Especially, as has been pointed out, in the Messianic prophecies of First Enoch that Jude still clings to.) Is it not important for us to notice that it is precisely this apocalyptic type of pre-Jesus Messiah that is still being proclaimed by Jude – and not Jesus Himself? How can Jesus ever get away from the preset Messianic patterns that were established for Him before He ever came here?!

Well, some have moved with Jesus beyond the former expectations – to an entirely New Covenant of grace and love. But many cling desperately to the old patterns, thinking that everybody who doesn’t agree with them is against Jesus Himself. *“Many will come in my name ... leading many astray.”* (Matthew 24:5; Mark 13:6) But who is misleading whom? It seems clear to me that Jesus Himself disagreed passionately with the former Messianic expectations. Nothing could prove that more dramatically or thoroughly than the Cross.

I might also point out that Jude was wrong (incorrect, if you like that better). That is, Jesus did not destroy all the wrong-thinking, wrong-acting people like Jude promised He would. We have gone on with our struggles to be faithful for lo these many centuries – sometimes right,

sometimes wrong; sometimes perplexed, sometimes repentant. But Jude was wrong! His dire threats were mistaken. The faithful got punished and persecuted at least as much the unfaithful, and often more so. And to this day, nothing we know of has been resolved in this realm. If we are faithful to Jesus, it is not because of Jude's threats. It is because we have believed Jesus, and felt His love, and have come to trust and love Him in return. And some of the passion and the power of that love are precisely because Jesus is *not* like the Messiah that was predicted (or prophesied).

Now, I might wish, on a bad day, that Jude had been right. It would have saved a lot of mayhem and trouble. No more struggles in the Middle East, or with terrorists, or in our own backyards. But Jude was not right. He was wrong about the timeline, and he was wrong about the nature and purpose of Jesus. A fair number of Christians in our day sound just like Jude did in his day – and they are just as wrong today as Jude was in his day. We did not get the Messiah we expected. He is never going to turn into the bloodthirsty, fiendish, throw-them-into-Hell Messiah that is being preached and proclaimed in so many ways and places still today. Jesus is full of grace and truth – full of love and mercy – full of forgiveness and endless new chances for anyone who repents. And if we do not come to trust that, we can never come to love Him. Admire, respect, fear, on some levels, perhaps ... but not love.

In any case, why should Jesus come again, when He is already here – yet most of us won't pay enough attention to Him to turn from doing things our own way, even for three or four full days in a row? "We won't be truly faithful until You *make* us" – in other words, until He comes as the Messiah we wanted in the first place. But, says Jesus (at least for the past two thousand years): That is not faith. That is coercion. I am never coming that way. I want you in love and in trust – or not at all. Look around you. What is really happening? Never mind what somebody is telling you is supposed to happen. Who are the people coming to me, and coming with me? They are coming because they want to – in free will, by their own free choice. In all the history of the world, have I ever forced anybody – have I ever made them do anything? They are coming to me because my WAY is the best they have ever seen or known. That is not what First Enoch pictured. But that is how I really work. I have already come to you. But from the day of my Resurrection on – if you want me, you have to come to me too.

Of course, I enjoy Jude's sermon more than those who don't know the Bible. At least he knows the stories and the traditions, even if he has never gotten very far out of the Old Testament into the New. **Cain** killed his brother, and Jude knows that some of these Gnostic teachings will kill the souls of those deceived by them. **Balaam** cursed God's people for money (until God turned Balaam's tongue around), and Jude thinks greed is a pathetic motive for betraying God. **Korah** seized a teaching authority which God had not granted him. Jude uses him as an example of all the false prophets and teachers who have plagued the covenant people from one end of the Scriptures to the other.

And then Jude turns mean, and I love it. That is, the word pictures he uses are telling and creative. These people (the adversaries who have wormed their way into the church) are hidden reefs in your love feasts. What happens to a ship that hits a hidden reef? (Imagine being an ancient mariner, without good maps or charts, never mind GPS.) These people are clouds without water. They may look good, but they carry no benefit. They are autumn trees without fruit. If a tree is ever going to have fruit, of course it will be in the autumn. But these people are doubly dead – they have neither fruit nor root. They produce nothing of value themselves, and they have cut themselves off from Jesus – meaning, they will not produce anything of value in the future either. The ocean is powerful and impressive, but these “wild waves” leave nothing but a disgusting layer of foam from their licentiousness. “Wandering stars” in all probability refers to shooting stars. They are a mere blip on the screen of the heavens. Faithful stars know and stay their course, and will be there night after night until creation itself comes to an end. (There are astronomers today who would argue with some of the details, but Jude didn't know any of them.)

And finally, they are grumblers – always finding fault, pointing out other people's shortcomings, and causing divisions – yet arrogant (because they only notice other people's flaws), and they are quite willing to flatter people if it will get them what they want. Aren't we glad that nobody is like that anymore?

In this crossfire between scorn, threats, and sarcasm, Jude suggests that his hearers side with him and return their churches to a more faithful and moral stance. Did I leave out anything? Oh yes; doggone it. There is the bit about Sodom and Gomorrah. There had been this huge conflagration where the Dead Sea now is. It was very, very impressive to

the ancient world, and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah had been completely destroyed. Looking around for a reason, they never thought it might be about bitumen pits and gases, and maybe a lightning bolt or something to set it off. No, it all blew up to punish people for the gang-rape described in Genesis 19. Do you really still believe that natural disasters are specific punishments for specific human sins? Vesuvius erupted and buried Pompeii because some individuals were misbehaving there more than in any of the other cities of the empire? How does God expect us to track the message, when there is so much sin going on everywhere (*“All have sinned and come short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23)) and he only punishes one place?

Next time Mount Rainier blows, what will we decide was wrong with Seattle? And the next time the San Andreas Fault really lets go? Well, we know what’s wrong around here.

In any case, among more conservative Christians (who, unlike most liberal Christians, *do* read all of the Bible, all of the time), Jude is one of the bastions cited against homosexuals. Well, they would claim to have nothing against homosexuals, just against homosexuality. Riggght. If it weren’t for the continued diatribe, from both sides, I could probably leave the topic for other times and places. But the church is burning far more energy on this topic than it is on prayer, conversion, commitment, Christology, and a host of other things that heterosexual and homosexual Christians should be working on together. So it is and has been a hot topic, and while I don’t like the manner, I like the fact that our society is dealing with it more and more – finally – and in the open.

Personally, I haven’t been directly involved in any of these controversies or arguments ... except for the past thirty-five years. Some denominations are just coming into hot battles on the subject, but we were in the thick of it when I was Conference Moderator here back in 1973. Before the ’70s, most conversations were quiet and private. I have never served a church, including this one, which did not have homosexuals in its membership. And not all, but always some of those homosexuals have been deeply committed Christians – prayerfully, biblically, morally, vocationally – and just as concerned as any of us about walking the Christian Path, loving God, and helping others. Because of the atmosphere and teachings of much of the Christian church in our time, many of them have been greatly concerned, at least in weak moments, about whether Christianity – and the grace of Jesus

Christ – was applicable to them. I think that is tragic, but I do not say that to them. I simply take them to the Scriptures – including to some that trouble them most.

This is not the time or forum for any fair treatment of this topic, but I want to make four brief comments.

1.) Often people quote some Scripture passage or some rule against homosexuality. I know two better passages and better rules than any they may be using:

“And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, ‘Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’” (Acts 10:45-47)

“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?” (Acts 11:15-17)

As is clear in the early chapters of Acts, the Holy Spirit is inviting and welcoming a vast array of people into the church – people whom none of the apostles at first imagined could ever become full members of the church. This is not mere theory to me. I have known too many homosexual Christians who have received the Holy Spirit as surely and powerfully as I have, so who am I to challenge the acceptance of the Holy Spirit?

2.) In many places and ways across the land, homosexual and heterosexual Christians are finding and feeling themselves pitted against each other. Who does that sort of thing? Do we not need each other? Have we time and energy enough to fight *each other*, when there is so much work to do, people to convert, and people to care about, love, and rescue from the clutches of Satan? Why is Christ divided? Well, we know why, but are we helpful participants in such divisions?

3.) I do not like it when heterosexual friends are promiscuous, or abandoned, or broken-hearted. Nor am I an advocate for celibacy for any of them. I like it very much when they fall in love; when they establish solid, committed, lifetime bonds of love and faithfulness; when they find partners to serve with, and follow Jesus with, and grow old with. And in fact, I am more than sad when this kind of life eludes them, or is interrupted for whatever reason, or is taken from them. Why would I not like this same kind of life for my homosexual friends? Do I think they would be better off blighted, promiscuous, abandoned, celibate, or without a partner? Is that my idea of loving my neighbor as myself, when I myself have a partner who means more than all the world to me? Wake up! Love other Christians. Value the love they have for you. If you want something to fight, fight Satan.

4.) And I probably don't need to add this, but I will. I do not for a minute think that all homosexuals are Christians, or are behaving correctly, or have their acts together. Most people I know, gay or straight, do not have long-term, committed love-bonds with loyal and faithful partners, even if they desperately want to. I suspect that's why Jesus came – because we all need converting, saving, forgiving, and redeeming. So now we are going to divide up again into first-class and second-class Christians, or into “the acceptable” and “the unacceptable”? Must we always be polarized? All conservatives are against stem-cell research and abortion and homosexuality ... and all liberals are for them? I do not like secular creeds or group-think any better than I like religious creeds or group-think. How about you?

Finally, Jude moves on to better things: *“Beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.”* Now he's cooking again. How about us?

Perhaps we should end with some thoughts from Paul: *“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.”* (II Corinthians 5:16-17)

PAY DIRT

It is a pleasant thing to me that we got to open this study of Jude on a Communion Sunday, and now we get to close it on a Communion Sunday. I will not try to explain that remark, but something about grace, forgiveness, love, and new starts. Also, while I know that sermons are supposed to be proclaiming the Word – saying what our Lord wants to have said, and not focused on pleasing either me or you – still it is a wonderful thing when you come with eagerness to hear and understand along with me. I have a strong suspicion that there are not many congregations who would have responded to this series of sermons from the Book of Jude in the way most of you have. But I better move on before I fall under Jude’s own warnings in the sixteenth verse, and get accused of flattering others to gain something for myself.

I have commented along the way that Jude does not “get” the full Gospel. Like us, he does not free himself from all the past patterns of his upbringing, or his past thinking and expectations. This prevents him from seeing or claiming the enormity of the newness and grace and love of Jesus and His New WAY. Our seeing this was one of the big reasons for this study. The Book of Jude is, in my estimation, a clear and fascinating illustration of how we get glimpses of the wonder and glory of why Jesus came, yet cannot extricate ourselves from enough of our environment, our past training and upbringing, and our assumptions and prejudices and past beliefs to comprehend or receive the full wonder and light and love of the Gospel. To be a Christian is always and ever to be a “work in progress.” I don’t think we are being told this, at least not often enough or clearly enough.

It is mentioned. We are a fellowship of sinners – more accurately, a fellowship of repentant and forgiven sinners. But even this accurate part is seldom made very clear. “Sanctification” is a major category in Christian theology. It is about how we are a “work in progress.” It is also the most neglected category of theology in our time. Mixed in are endless sermons and pictures about a conversion that takes us out of the old life and into the NEW. And that’s right, but that is the beginning, not the end, as is so often implied. Like in the old Lestoil ad: “Once I was a dirt, but now I am a clean.” Yes, well, it’s not quite that simple in a real and broken world. The Trio we call “God” has not closed out this boot-camp training ground, and we can only conclude that we need a lot more practice than we thought.

We get really tired of the mayhem here – the imperfections within and all around us. A good deal of the time, we are full of life and energy and hope and curiosity enough to be grateful and appreciative, and even enthralled. But it takes a conscious effort to not get focused on the pain, and the evil, and the flaws – to not get drawn into the dark side. Fear, anxiety, depression, and despair are always threatening to surround us. After 9/11 comes a tsunami, and after that a hurricane named Katrina, and after that ... well, it's only a matter of time. All of them impact us, but maybe the next one will hit even closer to home. Moreover, not all of the earthquakes are on the outside. If we want any peace in the midst of such realities, we must either trust God, or stop caring. Otherwise being here will rip our hearts out. Some people can concentrate enough on career, success, or making money to be oblivious for a little while. But counterfeit security and false gods never last.

Even for openers, conversion has to cut clear to the core, or it has no chance against the real demons of this realm. Because it is so dramatic in our individual experiences, we often mistake the beginning for the end. If it is the end and we are finished, complete, “saved,” then some of us get to be arrogant – like it was our doing and we saved ourselves, because we were heroic enough to let Jesus in. So now we have it all and know it all. If you run into a Christian who is arrogant, you know they surrendered to the wrong lord. Christianity runs on humility and gratitude. It is a constant life of prayer – of seeking guidance and forgiveness and renewal. It is not about thrills, though plenty of those will come if we stay faithful. It is not about new techniques or current fads or fancy advertising. It's the same old boring transformation from within: the presence of the Holy Spirit – guiding, directing, correcting, healing, and sending us out again – day after day, hour by hour, for the rest of our lives here.

Jude, by his flaws, reminds me of all these things. Does it surprise any of you that I suggest errors and shortcomings in Jude's message, yet still claim appreciation for him – still want to learn, ponder, and benefit from what he wrote for us? What kind of world do you live in?! If I find one flaw in you or in anything you say, do you think I will write you off or ignore everything you ever say from then on? One mistake and you are no longer of any value, are not to be trusted, are to be thrown away? I am so sad that so many Christians talk as if this is how it works. Inerrant Scripture indeed! This ludicrous man-made theory is blasphemy against everything The Book itself teaches us.

Oh how I wish there WAS a Hell! Not the real one – that is, the separation from God which all of us are constantly escaping from – but the burning Lake of Fire. How I would love to throw some ignorant, big-mouthed, know-it-all, proof-texting preachers right into the middle of it. They blaspheme the mercy and love of Jesus Christ, and the very nature of the God Jesus reveals. Of course, at the first yelp of pain, I would be desperate to get them out again.

Whatever you may have been told, wanting eternal punishment and pain for others is not who I am. Most certainly it is not who our Lord is. Why is that so hard to remember? He takes the pain onto Himself rather than putting it onto us. We try to make the table look nice and clean and civilized and all, but do not forget what this meal is really about, or why it is necessary, or what it costs Him. And if He sometimes gets passionate and dramatic and even sometimes sarcastic and insulting, it is because He wants us to learn fast enough to avoid some of the Hell we keep walking into – not a Hell that *He* pushes us into, but a Hell that *we* keep walking ourselves into.

But you know, I have run into more than one “Christian” who is that way. One wrong word and you are out. One disagreement and it is over. One honest answer to a question they have devised – a question dishonest in both frame and intent – and you are entered on their list of the damned. And, by the way, in clear contradiction to what Jesus really did teach. (Matthew 7:1; Luke 6:37) There was a man on the Search Committee that brought me from New England to Altadena, California. He was, in fact, the one who first suggested that the committee consider me. When I began preaching in Altadena, he was delighted. Sunday after Sunday he would come up afterward to express appreciation, and tell me this was just what the church had been missing and needing for so long. He was especially delighted with the series of sermons on prayer. But then one day I said something he didn’t like. I was appreciative that he came to my office to talk about it. But try though I did, I could not see that he knew better than I did, or saw this particular item more clearly than I did. Perhaps he did, but I could not just pretend. I have to see it, or I cannot change the message and still be faithful. So he gave me an ultimatum: either I would agree with him, or he would leave. And I have never seen him since. I think that is very sad.

Does it seem strange to any of us that Christ’s Message is having a hard time “coming into our world”? Would I expect a message as

new and radical as the Gospel to win its way into our world instantly or without a fight? All our lives, and throughout the whole history of the world, we have based everything on results, rules, behavior – the famous “bottom line.” And now suddenly, in an instant, we are going to switch over to a WAY and a religion that bases everything on relationship – and not only that, but relationships founded in, shaped by, and dependent upon our own very new relationship with God? Do we trust each other? Do we forgive each other? Do we love each other? Talk about new wine, and old wineskins bursting! It makes your head and heart reel – at least for the first sixty or seventy years.

So in these past Sundays I have covered much of what seems fascinating to me about the Book of Jude. On this last Sunday, I want to mention some things I particularly appreciate. Some of them are big, some small, but I will let you decide which are which.

1.) I start with verse 1 again: “*Jude, a slave [bond servant] of Jesus.*” He says it without explanation or apology. How I admire that. And it “startles” me into new awareness. “Slave” is a harsh word for us. It reminds me that pride and willfulness are still the issue. If I really want to turn life and will over to my Lord – if I really want all of my life and effort and energy to be at His disposal – then why would the word “slave” bother me? If Jesus is the Master and I trust Him – if I truly trust Him to be smarter than I am, and to love me more than I love myself – why would “slave” bother me? With a Master like this, slave is the very best it can get. If I have a problem with that word, does it not tell me there are still places in my life where I want to keep the control – to have it my own way – or at least to have veto power when the Holy Spirit tries to guide my life? No wonder some of the blessings still elude me. But Jude says it right up front and in the open, without fanfare or apology: “*Jude, a slave of Jesus Christ.*”

If Jude is the brother of Jesus, this is even more astounding. From brother to slave, and on purpose – of Jude’s own free will. I ponder that and am amazed, and blessed. If Jude can get through all the sibling rivalry – and all the inner issues of reputation, expectation, pride, and tradition – and claim Jesus with this kind of clarity and abandon, how about me? He can be wrong about lots of things, but if he is the slave of Jesus Christ, is he not my true brother too? Nobody made him be a slave. Nobody makes me be a slave either. But if we both choose Jesus as our Master, does that not form a powerful bond between us?

2.) Twice Jude uses “fear” in a way that gets my attention. It is a familiar teaching in Judaism: *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”* (Among the 27 times this phrase appears in the Bible, try Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 9:10; Acts 9:31; II Corinthians 5:11.) We do not want to be afraid of the loving God, and fear is usually our enemy. So we have trouble with such a phrase. But we miss Jude’s meaning unless we know how *he* uses the phrase, and understand that for him it is a beautiful principle.

Clearly it is a different brand of fear from what first comes to our minds. It is not a perfect substitute, but if you translate “fear” into “respect,” you will not be far off. Only, you need to capitalize RESPECT: a huge regard – a total respect – for true authority, wisdom, and power; a sheer realization that nothing can work right if I am out of step with, or opposed to, this true source of all life and light. We might remind ourselves that there is no genuine love without respect. Most love starts with respect. (Find an exception and come tell me about it.)

In verse 12, Jude says: *“These are the men who are hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear.”* Jude means that they have no “fear of God” – or, in our language, no RESPECT for God – or they would not be able to see you as toys for their own pleasure – objects to be maneuvered or manipulated – instead of children of the Holy One. If they do not respect you, they do not respect your Author. This is not just Jude, by the way; it is solid Judaism. But Jude calls it really straight here.

Again, in verses 22-23: *“And have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire, and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh.”* Jude has turned it around here. Before, it was others who had no RESPECT. Here he wants us to be careful that we are not the ones who have no RESPECT for God. I don’t think this is subtle, but it wouldn’t surprise me if some of you missed it. We are not often told that compassion, caring, love, and sympathy can be really dangerous. Did some of you find out the hard way? Do you teach your children to be wary? If you don’t, who will?

“Have mercy, with RESPECT.” Respect must start with God, and flow from there onto God’s children. If Satan cannot stop you from caring, what is his next best option? To push it beyond proper borders into ruin. It is a small step from caring to desiring; from compassion to passion. The only power on earth strong enough to control lust is love.

The world tries all the other solutions, including a wide array of fears, but they just fan the flames of lust to the tune of a million illegitimate babies, and a billion out-of-wedlock screws per month. If the person we are trying to help is feeling weak and needy, they are not likely to be as clear or strong as they might ordinarily be. Jude is saying, “Be careful!” Expect to be tempted. When you go to help others, make sure you are clear in your RESPECT for God, and therefore in your respect for and valuing of God’s children, and their true purpose and identity. They may not be clear about it, but *you* better be clear about it! Satan can turn helping into hurting – and caring into catastrophe – in the twinkling of an eye. And we have these stupid egos just waiting to be duped, and hoping to be fed at any moment. Love will never devalue or harm another person on purpose. And love is more powerful than lust – any day, and in every way. But enough! You heard it if you can hear it.

3.) The second half of verse 1: “*To those who are called, beloved in God the Father, and kept for Jesus Christ.*” (ESV) “*To those whom God has called.*” (REB) Even better.

If you are here on your own initiative, for your own reasons, or under your own power, you merely wandered in here. You are not part of it yet. I do not mean you are of no account. I mean you do not “get it” yet – you do not understand what is going on. Anything about this place that is our own idea or of our own doing – that is coming from our own initiative or intelligence or good will – is a false front, a charade, a merely human affair. Jude may not be right about everything, but he is dead-on about this. He knows that in every church community there are people who are there for their own reasons and purposes. They come and go as they please. But he is not talking to them.

He himself is a slave of Jesus Christ and he is talking to – addressing this letter to – others who are “called.” *Kalein* – called. William Barclay points out that *kalein* is used in three ways: the summoning of a person to office, to duty, to responsibility; the summoning of a person to a feast or festival; or the summoning of a person to court to give an accounting of what they have done or what they know happened. In the Christian Life, all three meanings are applicable. What is not applicable is the very familiar yet very erroneous notion that Christianity is our idea. “*You did not choose me, I chose you and appointed you*” (John 15:16-19)

We talk a lot about freedom and choice. And it is true that we are not coerced into this Life. But neither do we invent it, shape it, or control

it. We only answer a call. That is the extent of our freedom. Once we are here – once we belong to this New WAY – we are the summoned, not the summoners. Jude is very aware that in the churches to whom he writes, there are many people who are not “called.” They think *they* are the callers, or the initiators, or some kind of religious entrepreneurs. They think they can make it up as they go, and any way they want. And they are destroying the church. Everything about the church is Jesus’ idea and Jesus’ initiative. We are summoned, but it is never our idea. Most of us can remember when we resisted, and sometimes we find ourselves resisting still. The longer we walk this Way, the stronger the tug, the clearer the call – and the more we realize we have been called from the beginning. Even the plans and the purposes that result from the call are always partially out of our view. Is it not so for you? We do not see the full scope of the plan laid out before us. We are mostly called a step at a time. That is why it takes a lot of faith (trust) to answer the call. And that is why we call it the Christian Faith instead of the Christian Fact. (And of course you recognize *vocatio* and *vocation* – from *vocal cord* – the call of God.)

It is a JOURNEY that we are called into – not a product, or a pre-fabricated mold, or some human definition, or some scheme to solve all the world’s problems. The Journey, unlike any other, is founded on relationship, not in results or behavior or rules – and not on how anything is going in this realm at any given moment. That is so hard to remember. We care about our behavior, and sincerely. But that is neither the product nor the test nor the result that defines or guides us. Our relationship is with Jesus – and through Him, our relationship is with God – that is the ground and foundation of everything. Our behavior is often impacted, changed, even controlled by that relationship. But it never works the other way around. The moment we try to define our relationship to God by our behavior, we are lost – at least lost to the Christian Path. We are always aware that our behavior is imperfect, and that our motives for our behavior are flawed. So the moment we concentrate on our behavior, we either elevate ourselves into a pride that is false or too high to sustain, even if parts of it are valid – or we lower ourselves into a despair that cuts off love, steals our energy, and leaves us unable or unwilling to respond to the caring and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Law versus the Gospel is not just a minor theory for a few theological students. It surrounds all of life, and encompasses everything we ever experience – whether people use this particular language for it or not.

Jesus came to switch us from behavior principles to relationship principles. An awkward way to put it, perhaps, but behind the words is the dynamism that drives all life toward one way of living or toward another. I know no place in all the annals of human history, philosophy, literature, or religion which is based primarily and uncompromisingly on our *relationship* with God *except* for the ministry – the life, death, and resurrection – of Jesus of Nazareth. It is now being diluted and obscured by the gooeyness of New Age claims, and by the angry and punishing fear-based themes of many conservative wings of Christianity – none of which agree with each other, though of course all of them are “right.” Nevertheless, the core Message of the Gospel is still there in the New Testament story – for those who wish to peel away the layers and get beneath all the overlays. And it is found nowhere else.

Does Jude, in fact, know the Gospel? Like so many of us, I think he knows it, and does not mean to deny it. But in the heat of the moment, and out of familiar concern for what is happening in the real-life struggles of the moment, he reverts to what is more familiar. He even abandons the Gospel in order to threaten and persuade others to come together and return the church to strength and faith ... that it may go on proclaiming the Gospel. Ouch! How painfully familiar. We should resort to the old ways of thinking and behaving in order to protect and save the church from its enemies. Then the church will be strong again, and we can go back to living by its new and different Way. “Of course I love you, and we will get back to that love just as soon as I get through beating the tar out of you – get you straightened out.” Sometimes instead of beating, we merely shame, or abandon, or load guilt, or spread rumors, or sue. How convenient that there are so many different ways to threaten each other.

Does Jude forget any more often than we do? Probably not, and happily he also remembers: “*May mercy, grace and love be yours in fullest measure.*” (1:1) “*Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory*” (1:24) “*Keep yourselves in the love of God*” (1:21) Never forget that you are valued, and loved, and cherished beyond all human understanding – by the God of love revealed in Jesus Christ. Yes, Jude knows the Gospel. Like with ourselves and each other, we are sorry that sometimes he forgets.