

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.