

Taking Calvary to the Community:
Houses of Worship

Brian Henderson ▪ July 17, 2011
with Rabbi Richard Rheins, Temple Sinai, Denver, CO

Text: John 14:1-6

I tried finding statistics for the number of faith communities or houses of worship for the city of Denver but I could not. In reality, as I googled and searched and asked around, I've come to the conclusion that it is fair to say that Denver has many...it has a lot...of houses of worship.

Some are large and well known and many are small and known hardly at all. There is a diversity about Denver's faith communities that is rich and wouldn't it be good if we could connect more with each other than we often do?

Hans Küng, scholar, theologian and Roman Catholic priest has said: "There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions and no peace among the religions without dialogue."

As our pulpit is shared today with Rabbi Rheins...may it be that as we seek to take Calvary to the community...that we think often about the importance of taking our faith community to other faith communities different from our own. For in truth...we have more in common than the news and media and even religious outlets suggest.

You've heard me tell the story before...the story about a woman who arrived at the gates of heaven. St. Peter asked: "Religion?"

She answered: "Episcopalian." St. Peter looked down his list and said, "Go to room 24 but be very quiet as you pass by room 8."

Next a man arrived. "Religion?" asked St. Peter. "Roman Catholic." "Go to room 18 but be very quiet as you pass room 8."

Finally, a Jewish Rabbi arrived. "Religion?" "Jewish." "Go to room 11 but be very quiet as you pass room 8." The Rabbi quickly asked, "I can understand there being different rooms for different religions, but why do I have to be quiet when I pass room 8?"

St. Peter shrugged, "Well, the Baptists are in room 8 and they think they're the only ones here." ☺

When thinking about different faith communities...

It's quite remarkable to think that just east of us is the Colorado Muslim Society on South Parker Road...the Doulos Korean Church just off Hampden...

North of Calvary is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints...Temple Emmanuel...Church of the Risen Christ Roman Catholic Church...and Grace United Methodist Church...

West of Calvary on Hampden we find First Plymouth United Church of Christ...Bethany Lutheran...Colorado Community Church...Temple Sinai and First Universalist among others...

With these houses of worship and their respective beliefs and sacred scriptures in mind...we come to our text this morning in John 14...

Too often John 14:6 is used as a litmus test to determine who may get to heaven and how...

In truth and paying attention to the Jewish context into which the Gospel of John was written...it may be that these words of Jesus are words that would have implied to first century, Jewish Christians...something about Torah...

Torah...the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures...of what we call the Old Testament...showed one *the way, the truth and the life*.

So...maybe...we ought to read these words of Jesus as...if you want to know God...then you ought to know Torah...you ought to know the scriptures...

For the scriptures...sacred texts as they are...do tell us much about life and faith...even life and faith from across the ages...

I wonder when it was you last read for yourself from our sacred texts...the Bible...

Rabbi Rheins will share now greetings and reflections about Torah and the Hebrew scriptures...

Sacred Text: Not Just Lip Service

Greeting:

First, let me express my profound appreciation to Rev. Brian Henderson for the invitation to be a part of your sacred worship this Sunday morning. Your innovative series that explores the light of God that is expressed in different traditions speaks volumes about the truly blessed mission of this congregation. On behalf of the 1,100 family of Temple Sinai, your neighbors just down the street, let me say *Shalom Aleikhem*, peace unto you and may God's blessings continue to shine upon you and your loved ones.

Intro Message:

This morning, I want to share with you a Jewish perspective about the Sacred Text of the Bible. Note, that when I refer to the Bible, I am speaking about the Hebrew Scriptures, which you often call the Old Testament. That is the book we hold most sacred. Indeed, we are proudly known as the people of the book. Our Jewish ancestors were touched by God and the Bible is our most precious legacy. Some 3,500 years after Moses and the Children of Israel stood at Mount Sinai, we, their great-great-great-great-grandchildren, still lovingly hand the Torah to our children and teach them to read it in Hebrew, to explore the depths of its meaning, and, most importantly to strive to live up to God's message.

The Torah is the scroll on which the first five books of the Bible is handwritten in Hebrew. 13-year old Jewish boys and girls are given the privilege of reading from it at they become Bar or Bat Mitzvah. In the course of a year, we will read the entire Torah. In addition, the other books of the Hebrew Bible, specifically, the Prophets and the Writings (which include the Books of Psalms, Proverbs, Ruth, Job, the Song of Songs, etc), are read as a part of our liturgical calendar. Our prayerbooks are veritable anthologies of Biblical and Talmudic passages.

So, when Rev. Henderson asked me to address the role of the God's sacred text in Judaism, my first question was: "How long do I have?"

Alas, even if we were here for Forty Days and Nights, it would not be enough. At the end, we concluded that I'll keep my remarks to around five minutes, and since the greetings and introduction shouldn't count, those who are keeping time should press your watch right-----NOW!

Text:

It was extremely difficult to focus on only one passage to help convey the essential relationship of the Bible to the lives and faith of Jews and Judaism. There are so many to choose from. But, given our limits, let me share with you a passage from the Book of Deuteronomy that speaks directly to the issue of text, revelation, and what we are to do about it.

יא בִּי הַמְצִוָּה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצִוֶּה הַיּוֹם לֹא־נִפְלְאָת הוּא מִמֶּנִּי
וְלֹא־רַחֲקָה הוּא:
יב לֹא בִשְׁמַיִם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲלֶה־לָּנוּ הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְיִקְחָה לָּנוּ וְיִשְׁמַעֲנוּ
אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה:
יג וְלֹא־מֵעֵבֶר לַיָּם הוּא לֵאמֹר מִי יַעֲבֹר־לָּנוּ אֶל־עֵבֶר הַיָּם וְיִקְחָה לָּנוּ
וְיִשְׁמַעֲנוּ אֹתָהּ וְנַעֲשֶׂנָּה:
יד בִּי־קָרֹב אֵלַיךְ הַדְּבָר מְאֹד בְּפִיךָ וּבְלִבְבְּךָ לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ: (Deut 30:11-14)

The operative word is the very last word of the passage in Hebrew:

La-a-so-to, "to do it." That is, our relationship to text should not be one in which we think the beginning and the end is in the study or the preaching of the Bible. Rather, it is how we live our lives in accordance with its teaching.

We all know those who have distinguished themselves through their

remarkable ability to quote scripture. Their memories are phenomenal. But, from a Jewish point of view, memorizing passages is like “talking the talk” when God wants us to “walk the walk.”

And what is that “walk?” Jews call it *Halakhah*, literally, “the walk.” We strive to fulfill the *mitzvot*, the commandments of the Bible. Our Holy Days are the Biblical Holy Days, our Sabbath is the Bible’s sabbath (the one Jesus observed), many of us continue to avoid eating the foods that the Bible said were inappropriate. And we strive to treat life as God’s gift.

The Talmud lists the following actions as the essence of the Bible’s instruction as to how one is to live a blessed life.

(Based on the Talmud, *Shabbat* 127a)

אלו דברים שאדם אוכל פרותיהם בעולם הזה והקרן קיימת לו לעולם הבא, ואלו הן:

These are the deeds which yield fruit that is enjoyed in this world and in the world to come:

כבוד אב ואם,

Honoring one's father and mother;

וגמילות חסדים,

Doing deeds of love and kindness;

והשכמת בית המדרש שחרית וערבית,

Attending the house of study morning and evening;

והכנסת אורחים,

Providing hospitality for the traveler;

וּבְקוֹר חוֹלִים,

Visiting the sick;

וְהִכָּנְסַת פִּלֵּה,

Rejoicing with the bride;

וּלְוֵית הַיָּמָת,

Burying the dead with respect;

וְעִיּוֹן תִּפְלָה,

Praying with sincerity;

וְהִבְאַת שְׁלוֹם בֵּין אָדָם לַחֲבֵירוֹ,

Bring peace between people

וְתִלְמוּד תּוֹרָה פְּנִיגָד בְּלָם.

And the study of Torah leads to all of these deeds.

The challenge of being a religious person in these cynical and secular days, is not to close out the rest of the world. Rather, to truly live in God's light is to reach out to those in darkness and demonstrate the blessings and love that God shines on all. Let us continue to walk the walk and treat all we meet with joy and goodness, with compassion and understanding, with generosity and moral values. Jews and Christians are partners in this task. We each have a unique and blessed relationship with God. Let us respect our differences and share our blessings and help transform this world into the garden God has instructed us to grow and tend.