

The Fragile Flame of Love

Rabbi Mark Dov Shapiro

Given at Christ Church Cathedral on March 19, 2017

My father was a radiologist. He was Chief of Radiology at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto. He grew up in Montreal. He was a graduate of McGill University medical school.

His little brother, Stan, was not a physician. He was a microbiologist who chaired the Department of Biology at University of Illinois at Chicago.

Stan was delighted with his life in science, although, truth be told, it wasn't his first choice. He too applied to McGill's medical school back in the 1940's. He had excellent grades. He was a perfect candidate - except for one problem. McGill medical school had a quota on Jews. Only so many could be accepted in any one year and their grades had to be higher than non-Jews. Stan didn't make the cut the year he applied. One less Jewish doctor.

It's called anti-Semitism.

Flash forward to 1957. I'm in Second Grade. It's recess and Heather Commodore is talking about plans for her birthday party. Heather announces she has too many people to invite. Then she says, "I know what I'll do. I won't invite the Jews."

Pow! I punched her in the stomach and got sent to the principal's office.

Kids say the darndest things, but it's still anti-Semitism.

Years go by and it's the summer of 1973. My wife Marsha and I are traveling through Europe as students. We've been to Rome, Venice, and Salzburg. Now we've arrived at the train station in Vienna and taken a room from one of the people offering accommodations. It's a lovely place - except we soon discover that we are much farther from the city center than we expected. That first night we even meet some other travelers who tell us they have a room in the heart of the city. They tell us we can have their place the very next night.

So what do we do?

The next morning after breakfast we tell our landlord that we can't stay for the three nights we promised. We want to pay and leave immediately.

"You can't do that," she replies. "You said three nights and you owe me the money for three nights."

I apologize and explain that her setting just isn't right for us. We go back and forth. She refuses to let us go and also refuses to give back our passports, which she had requested when we checked in.

By this time, temperatures are rising. I am insisting that we need to go with those passports. She steps back, freezes her eyes on us, and declares, "I should have expected this. You're Jewish, aren't you?"

It's called anti-Semitism. It really happened...to me.

And there are more stories to tell than we have time here this morning.

But perhaps the most important reality here this morning is that we are here. Or, better still, I AM HERE. You invited me. Tom and Bishop Fisher created this idea

of a Rabbi in Residence for the Cathedral.

Christians invited me, a JEW, to talk and teach in a church.

Friends, in light of my three brief stories and in light of all the anti-Semitism that has darkened the last 2000 years and more, we together are an amazement.

If my grandmother (whose father was murdered by a Romanian peasant when she was a little girl) could see me now!

If she could have been at the Jewish Community Center a week ago last Thursday, she would have been amazed. Hundreds of people from all over Springfield, Mayor Sarno, Senator Lesser, a representative for the Attorney General, someone from the Justice Department, and so many Christians all came together to protest anti-Semitic threats against the local JCC.

Tom was there, Pam Porter was there, parishioners from the Cathedral, and many area clergy joined us in the evening cold. The whole event was initiated by the Interfaith Council of Western Massachusetts, which is an umbrella organization embracing Christians, Unitarians, Muslims, Baha'i, and Jews.

Everyone assembled because of two threats against the JCC, which led to two evacuations of the building. These sorry events took place against a backdrop of no fewer than 148 threats against Jewish institutions in 30 different communities around the country.

On a personal level, I think I may have been most touched by the message of love from Dr. Bajwa on behalf of the Islamic Society of Western Massachusetts. I say this because over the years I have been able to offer support to the mosque again and again when it faced discrimination. Now the tables were turned. Dr. Bajwa came to me in my hour of need to offer his blessing.

Who would have expected this turn of events?

As I said before, we are an amazement.

Together, we live in an era that no one would ever have expected. Let alone the loving support of our Muslim neighbors, Christians speaking peace to Jews is a remarkable gift of our time.

The Catholic Church stepped forward first in the 1960's as it began to reconsider its relationship with members of all faith communities and Jews in particular. Back in 1965 in a document called *Nostra Aetate* (meaning "in our time"), the Church proclaimed an interest in "what human beings have in common."

The Church then spoke of Judaism and acknowledged that the roots of Christianity are to be found in Judaism. "[We] draw sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree [of Judaism] onto which have been grafted the wild shoots" that were to grow into Christianity.

Nostra Aetate went on to say, "The Church decries hatreds, persecutions, and manifestations of anti-Semitism directed against Jews at any time and by anyone...[We wish] to foster and commend mutual understanding and esteem."

After centuries of separation, Nostra Aetate and what has followed from Catholics over the years is an amazement.

And here's the Episcopal Church speaking on the same topic.

"All real living is meeting." These words of the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, point to the essence of Jewish-Christian dialogue.

As Christians, we should view our encounter with the Jewish people not as a threat but an opportunity. Sharing our faith freely with Jews enables us to view our own religious conviction more clearly, and to gain a new perspective on the faith and practice of those who remain in God's covenant with Israel.

The World Council of Churches Assembly at its first meeting in Amsterdam in 1948 declared: "We call upon the churches we represent to denounce anti-Semitism, no matter what its origin, as absolutely irreconcilable with the profession and practice of the Christian faith. Anti-Semitism is sin against God and human life."

The opportunity to [engage in interfaith dialogue] is likely to warm your heart. May the stranger you meet become not simply familiar, but beloved.*

On this third Sunday of Lent in the year 2017, what we have here is an amazement.

As troubled as we ought to be by the ongoing persistence and threat of anti-Semitism, we ought not take for granted what amounts to a miracle of sorts. You and I, Jew and Christians, we are here in solidarity and fellowship.

It is as if we have lit a candle against the darkness.

In fact, I have to tell you that one of my favorite Jewish symbols is the candle. As some of you may know, we Jews welcome the Sabbath and all our holidays in the evening. And we accomplish this welcome by lighting candles - most often in our homes around a table set for dinner. There is nothing more beautiful than that moment when everyone grows quiet, the match is struck, a blessing is said, and then the candles are lit.

A kind of hush takes over the moment. The flames flicker. The flames shine.

But here's the truth about those flames and the historic moment in which we find ourselves as Jews and Christians. The flames are fragile. As much as they bespeak peace, it takes very little to extinguish their light.

So it goes with this flame of dialogue we have lit between Jews and Christians. It's only a flame - a very fragile flame. It can only sustain itself if we protect it, nourish it, and believe in it.

Which is, I think, the message of this morning's reading from the Book of Exodus. To be honest, when I first read it, I couldn't quite figure out how it connected to this morning. Remember, it's the story of the Israelites in the desert complaining that they have nothing to eat or drink. They wonder in anger if they wouldn't be better off back in Egypt where at least they weren't starving.

It's a bit of a nasty story until you drop back and see the larger context. It turns out that today's reading from Exodus Chapter 17 follows the fabulous events of the Exodus. To be exact, in Chapters 14 and 15 of Exodus, the Israelites have escaped from Egypt, been pursued by Pharaoh's chariots, and escaped with their lives by the crossing of the Red Sea.

They have been saved. They have had an immediate and direct sense of God. They have been transformed.

It's against this extraordinary backdrop that they grow cranky over food and water in today's reading.

Which either teaches us that the people are ungrateful, or more likely teaches us that people in general are fickle. Even when people experience the ultimate, they/we soon forget. We are moved by Beethoven's Ninth - the Ode to Joy, but then

the traffic won't move in the parking garage and the joy evaporates. We see the most beautiful sunsets or landscape on vacation and love life, but then we come home to a leaky faucet and life is aggravating.

We read about love and hold hands with our neighbors, but then we get busy and go about our errands.

We forget.

We get absorbed in our own lives.

All of which we means that this amazing moment when Jews and Christians stand together against prejudice is only as lasting as we make it.

If we aren't vigilant, those who hate can win.

If we don't pay attention and come to the next rally, those who hate can win.

If we don't spread the word and tell our neighbors that we care, those who hate can win.

There is a flame. There is light. There is hope at this amazing time for Jews and Christians.

But it's fragile.

It needs our commitment,

It needs our dedication so that the flame of understanding becomes a beacon for the very best that we share as human beings.

I'm so proud and honored to be here at church. Tell everyone, please, what we are building. It's the key to our future together.

**Quoted from *Toward our Mutual Flourishing, The Theological Statement on Interreligious Relations*, The Most Reverend Dr. Katharine Jefferts Schori, Presiding Bishop The Episcopal Church; *Guidelines for Christian-Jewish Relations for Use in the Episcopal Church*, 1988, General Convention of the Episcopal Church (USA)*