

Jews and Christians: What We Share

1 Samuel 1:1-10 & 1 Samuel 2:1-10

Psalm 51

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First United Methodist Church, Baraboo

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I begin with a word to Baraboo High School students here today; I grieve for the trauma that you have gone through this week being the subject of local, national and international attention. Baraboo and Baraboo High School have not felt safe this week. I hope this place, this church will feel safe today, and it will be a place for you to lament, cry with you if need be, be angry or whatever it is you feel. Our youth leaders Kenda Scott and Mary Krsznaniek and I as pastor are available to help you or your friends process your feelings. We care about you.

To all who love Baraboo; it has been so painful to see how our community has been held up as an example of what's wrong with this country. This is not the Baraboo we know.

To the staff at Baraboo High School; my heart goes out to you, as you have been helping the students work through a myriad of feelings, while working with the administration, parents and also the community.

To the school district staff, law enforcement and city officials who have fielded complaints, dealt with hate mail, even death threats; your efforts to respond in steady, thoughtful ways are deeply appreciated.

To the members of the Jewish community in Baraboo, I stand with you in shock and outrage at the image of a Nazi salute being identified with this community, which is your home;

To those people who have not always felt safe, welcomed, accepted, or appreciated at school or in the community of Baraboo because of race, ethnic background, gender identity or sexual orientation, I express my sorrow and solidarity.

To the those students pictured in the photo that went viral this week who were giving an innocent "wave goodbye" to their parents or who didn't wave at all, I want to express my

deep sorrow at what you are living through right now. I am thankful for friends and parents who have stood by you.

To those students pictured in this photo who however briefly were making a Nazi salute as a joke (and I believe there were some): this action was stupid and harmful. Every preceding generation (including mine) has done stupid things as teens. What's changed is now your actions can be posted online, misinterpreted, spread around the world, and others can add a narrative to your actions that you never intended. And future employers and colleges can see all that and evaluate you accordingly. If those students come to the community program on Monday night at 6:00 p.m. at the high school (and I hope they do) you will not hear talk about shaming anyone. What I believe you will find if you come is a talk of path to healing, and seeing what can be learned by everyone through all this. You'll hear the rabbi touch on ways that hurt can be acknowledged, acknowledgement of that hurt/apologies are offered and actions laid out so that relationships that have been broken can be healed.

There is someone who posted this picture on social media with malicious intent, adding a racial slur. I don't know your name and I don't know what you intended but sooner or later this will come to light. I hope and pray you find a way to enter into a process of confession, repentance and forgiveness. Change, and growth and transformation is possible for everyone through all this, and that includes you.

It is not right that the students involved in this picture be villainized. And it's also wrong to turn away from the real issues that this incident has unveiled. I believe we need to change the narrative away from students and shift the focus to the facing the truth that this incident has brought up: that racism and bigotry is part of our current reality.....

Again, from now on this morning, I'm not talking about these students involved in this photo. I'm talking about how we as nation and residents of Sauk County share a history that includes bigotry and racial bias.

Nazi salutes are not just a thing of past. According to the FBI the number of reported hate crimes increased by 17 percent in 2017, including 37 percent surge in anti-Jewish incidents. Anti-Semitism is real. It is a part of our past that we as Christians that we don't like to think about. Anti-Semitism is "hate or strong dislike of Jews, or actions that express hate or dislike of Jews." I'd like to spend the rest of my time in this sermon talking about anti-

Semitism. I hope to unravel one strand of this complex tangle of narratives at play here. I pray that my remarks help a little in understanding the outrage that this incident has generated.

At first it seems absurd, that Christians would hate Jews. How could it be that a faith that worships a Jewish messiah would hate Jews? Jesus of course was a Jew and remained a Jew his whole life. We read from the Hebrew scripture every week in our worship. Today we heard the story of Hannah, whose son Samuel anoints David to be the king of Israel. Christians and Jews both consider the psalms, Genesis, Exodus, Proverbs, and the prophets to be sacred words. How can it be that we as Christians would have animosity, even hatred for our own ancestors in faith?

Let's think about what happened in the early church. Conflicts arose over how to explain why so many Jews did not accept Jesus as the Jewish messiah that had been expected for so long. When early Christians first shared the message of Jesus in cities around the Mediterranean they went to synagogues as Jews to share the good news with other Jews. But this message was not always well received. Christians began to be expelled from synagogues. Then they took the message of Jesus to the Gentile (non-Jewish) world. Tension slowly grew stronger between Jews and Christians. This was when the gospels were being written. And some of these conflicts going on in the synagogues between Jews and Christians were reflected there, especially Matthew and John.

Let's look at Matthew 27: 24-26 for instance. Matthew 27 tells the story of how the Jewish religious leaders have handed Jesus over the Roman authorities to be executed for blasphemy. Pilate the Roman governor gives the crowd a choice: shall I release Barabbas or Jesus? "Let Jesus be crucified" the crowd replied. Here's what it says in Matthew 27:24-26: So when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood;^[a] see to it yourselves."²⁵ Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"²⁶ So he released Barabbas for them; and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. The key words are "his blood be on s and on our children." This is the origin of the "blood curse": the belief that Jews were responsible for the killing of Jesus (and the blame being taken off the Romans and placed on the Jews). This idea was raised to the level of doctrine in the early church, by preachers like John Chrysostom. According to Biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine, this this one verse (Matthew 27:25) "Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!" caused more Jewish

suffering throughout history than any other in the New Testament. Christians have used the term “Christ killer” to justify violence, and murder of Jews during the Crusades, the Spanish inquisition, the pogroms during the middle ages up to modern times, and the Holocaust. It was only fifty years ago that official Catholic teachings changed at Vatican II to reject Jewish guilt for the killing of Jesus; stating that Jews neither past nor present were responsible for the death of Jesus. This does not let Protestants off the hook here. I’m not point the finger at Catholics per se but naming how the church universal, the church as a whole, played a role in anti-Semitism. In medieval Europe, holy week (when Passion plays reenacted the events of Jesus’ final days) was a very dangerous time for Jews. The cry against Jews as “Christ killers” was used to justify destroying Jewish homes, businesses, and attacks by violent mobs. The word ghetto which means a neighborhood where a minority group lives originated in Venice, referring to the part of the city where Jews were restricted to live and work. The discrimination against Jews in education and housing made it’s way to this country, with quotas restricting Jewish admission to colleges and universities lasting well into the 20th c. When Adolf Hitler rose to power in Germany in the aftermath of the German defeat of World War I, he fed on the anti-Semitism that was already there for all the reasons I just named. Anti-Semitism was a key element of Nazi philosophy. Along with hatred of Jews, there was hatred of the Roma people, Jehovah’s witnesses, the physically and mentally disabled, and homosexuals. All these groups suffered at the hands of the Nazi’s too. The tell-tale salute with arm outstretched was a sign to the world of loyalty to the man, and the philosophy that was responsible for the killing of six million Jews. That is the main reason this photo has caused such an uproar.

I have offered my thoughts and perspective on this week’s events but inevitably I’ve left some things out. One person’s vision is always limited. After worship if you’d like to share

your views, or have more conversation about this incident has affected you and your family, let's sit down during fellowship hour and talk.

So, here's what all this has to do with us. There are some things we can all do in response to the events of this week:

- 1) Be part of the community conversations in Baraboo. The dates are November 19th at 6:00 p.m. at Baraboo High school, Monday November 29 at City Hall at 6:00 p.m. and another event is being planned.
- 2) Continue the conversation about what can be learned from this incident. Listen first. Then share your views. Then listen some more. Reflect.
- 3) Take time to respond to the Welcoming Statement ballot on the blue insert today (if you haven't voted already). This vote our congregation is taking does not relate to anti-Semitism per se but it does have to do with diversity, and how we treat a group of people who have been designated as "the other" by society. However you mark your ballot regarding whether we should adopt this welcoming statement; here's one thing is certain. Churches need to be a safe places for all people in our community.

The final thing we can all do is something we'll do together in a minute: we need to admit we are not perfect. When it comes to prejudice and racial bias, we have not always been the people we want to be. We have all failed at times to treat others with justice and fairness. In a minute we're going to read a prayer of confession, attributed to the talented military hero David, who was anointed King of Israel by Hannah's son Samuel. We share this prayer (Psalm 51) with our Jewish neighbors. Once David made a terrible mistake. He arranged for the death of his loyal commander Uriah so that David could marry Bathsheba, Uriah's wife. Nathan the prophet comes to point out this great error to David. David's response was this psalm, this prayer of confession and repentance.

All of us in this room, the people of Baraboo, aren't we like David? Aren't we also both flawed and talented, good people yet capable of doing great harm? We all make mistakes. And as Christians we are guilty of anti-Semitism; it's part of who we have been and unless we're intentional about undoing past mistakes, it will be who we still are. We are all people whose lives have been broken by sin. At times we harm others without being aware. That's why we all need "Nathans" in our lives; people who point out our flaws. Could this week's

events be like Nathan to all of us in Baraboo? Calling to light the ways that even in our lovely, beautiful community of Baraboo there is a side we don't often see and don't like to face, which is our capacity to exclude, promote prejudice, even be cruel to those who are vulnerable or different. Just as David did not welcome Nathan's words, it's not comfortable for us to have our inadequacies, our faults exposed. Yet maybe these events are a wake-up call that there is more work to be done to overcome prejudice and bigotry in our community.

So, I end with this good news. One of the many things we share with our Jewish ancestors and our Jewish neighbors today is our belief in a "do-over" God. When we make mistakes, we can have a "do-over." The way things have been in not the way things have to be going forward. Through confession, repentance and forgiveness God can work in our hearts. People can change. Things can change. By naming how we have harmed others intentionally or unintentionally, and seeking forgiveness, a new beginning is possible, no matter how difficult the past has been. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.