



When the Church Gets It Wrong

TEXT
John 18:33–38

February 21, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I want you to think of why the church matters to you. What is the most important gift the church has given to you in your life?

Last Sunday we remembered the words of the apostle Paul. *We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.* These words are written to the church. So the church is a community that holds the treasure of the gospel in clay jars.

There was a time when the church held significant sway over culture. Those days are past now. More common these days, the church is viewed with suspicion, even hostility at times. Perhaps most troubling of all, the church is viewed with apathy.

Why is that? Let me remind you of this story:

In 1633, the Christian inquisition condemned Galileo as a heretic. Galileo was a faithful Catholic, and he was a personal friend of Urban VIII, the pope at the time.

In 1609, Galileo learned of a new invention: the telescope. What he discovered in the night sky pulled the rug out from under some previously held convictions. Galileo found evi-

dence to support the theory that Copernicus had espoused years earlier: that the earth rotated around the sun, not the other way around. Because of this new knowledge, the church dragged Galileo before the inquisition. The church quoted a handful of verses, like:

The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved. (Psalm 96:10)

The sun rises and the sun sets, and returns to its place. (Ecclesiastes 1:5)

To read such verses literally was not what the ancient writers intended, but that was lost on the church in Galileo's day. So the church submitted him to the inquisition.

In its harshest forms, the inquisition could leave one imprisoned for years. Physical torture was sometimes used. Galileo was condemned to house arrest. The church was not only wrong about the science, but also wrong about the scripture.

Over 300 years later, in 1957, the first satellite entered space. And 35 years later, in 1992, the church reversed her condemnation of Galileo.

This story is often told in the culture as an example of the foolishness of the church. The Indigo Girls even sing about it. Now we

can shrug our shoulders and say, "Well, that's not us." But people who are not part of the church don't make those distinctions. When the church looks foolish, the whole church looks foolish.

You no doubt remember that in 2005, the Kansas School Board of Education, with a majority of folks who identified themselves as evangelical Christians, changed the definition of science and voted to include intelligent design into the science curriculum. It made national news; and Kansas looked foolish; and the church looked backward.

Paul was wise. He knew long ago that, as long as faith in Jesus Christ is tied to the church, we have this treasure in clay jars.

The blundering of the church has, at times, been foolish; at other times, shameful. It's hard to say when the most shameful moment of the church took place.

We read this morning a portion of conversation between Jesus and Pilate; and as John records it, Jesus said, *If his kingdom was of this world, his followers would be fighting to keep Jesus from being handed over to the Jews.* I cringe whenever John talks like that.

In Chapter 9, when Jesus heals the man born blind, John

says, *The Jews did not believe he had been born blind.*

In Chapter 10, it says the Jews took up stones to stone Jesus. And in this passage, it makes it sound like Jesus has enmity with the Jews. We know the dangerous consequences of this kind of thinking.

It wasn't long after Christians experienced the baptism of power from Constantine that Christians began to hold hostility to Jews, deeming them killers of Christ.

The full ugliness of this conviction manifested itself in the Holocaust. In Susan Neiman's book *Evil in Modern Thought*, she says, "What's appalling [is that] the most unprecedented crimes can be committed by the most ordinary people."¹

The Holocaust happened in the center of Western civilization by people who read Shakespeare and listened to Bach in the evenings and ran the ovens during the day. And on weekends, they were in church.

In 1948, after the full horror of the Holocaust was known, the Evangelical Church in Germany² said that the Holocaust happened because God was punishing Jews for their rejection and continued crucifixion of Christ.³

This is shameful. For the church to justify anti-Semitism is to reject the very teaching of Christ — a Jewish rabbi himself.

So why did John talk that way about "the Jews"? Was John anti-Semitic?

No, John's gospel is written in the midst of a family fight. At the time of this writing, John's

mostly Jewish community was engaged in a theological fight over the significance of Jesus. When the temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, all of Judaism began rethinking what it means to be Jewish. The followers of Jesus had understood themselves to be a part of Judaism, but after the destruction of the temple, tension grew. The followers of Jesus were either kicked out or walked out of formal Judaism. It is the original church split. It was in that context that John's gospel is written.

I know some of you have been in congregations when there was a division in the congregation. It can get painful. Words can become extreme. I remember a few years ago opening *The Kansas City Star* and reading from folks who used to be in our denomination. They said they had to leave the PCUSA because Presbyterians didn't believe in Jesus anymore — one more example of how it's perfectly fine today to create your own facts.

The division in John's congregation was painful, and that pain shows up in his writing. It's important to understand that. John was not anti-Semitic, but wrote in Jewish worldview. And John offers no justification for anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism in the church may be our most shameful moment — but it's not our only one.

As you well know, I am the product of the Southern Presbyterian Church. We were all one church until the Civil War, and then the church split north and south. It was December of 1861 when leaders of the Church gath-

ered in Augusta, Georgia, at a church where Woodrow Wilson's father served as pastor.

The church offered a formal statement, which, among other things, said this: *As we contemplate the condition [of the slave] in the southern States, and contrast it with that of their fathers before them, and that of their brethren in the present day in their native land, we cannot but accept it as a gracious Providence that they have been brought in such numbers to our shores, and redeemed from bondage of barbarism and sin.*⁴

Our church was declaring the institution of slavery to be the will of God, a gracious providence. It is shameful.

I have a plaque in my office that one of you gave me recently, and it simply reads: "Jesus loves you ... but I'm his favorite."

I wonder if that is what women felt the church was saying to them through the generations, when we wanted them to teach the children and prepare the food for the covered-dish supper, but they couldn't preach or serve on the Session. About the same time the world figured out how to get a satellite in space, Presbyterians figured out how to let a woman in the pulpit.

That's embarrassing. It's shameful.

More recently, the church took a generation to decide if our brothers and sisters whom God created gay or lesbian are OK or somehow flawed.

It's shameful.

Paul knew that as long as faith in Jesus Christ is connected to the church, to Christians, the

treasure of the gospel will be in clay jars.

Why bring this up? I have three reasons.

First, when the church blesses bigotry, it is not only evil, it is foolish. It is evil because it injures those we dehumanize — Jews, blacks, women, gays, scientists. It is foolish because they and others who are not even part of those groups look at us and say, “Why would you want to be part of the church?” It matters.

Robert Putnam says this is a major reason young adults are distant from the church. The church they see, often on TV, seems very comfortable with judgment — particularly of their gay friends — and Putnam says, the younger generation looked at that church and said, “If that is what it means to be church, I want nothing to do with it.”⁵ This is a problem.

I cringe when I hear how careless language, often spoken by those who identify themselves as Christian, speaks blanket condemnation of all Muslims or Mexicans — and I think, here we go again. We haven’t learned anything. We simply cannot offer a faithful witness to Jesus Christ through hatred and condemnation. It simply doesn’t work. It is a poor witness to Jesus Christ.

But there is a second reason we need this reminder. We may see things differently than some who have gone before.

I don’t know any Presbyterians who think slavery is a good idea anymore. Our denomination has made pronouncement after pronouncement condemning all forms of anti-Semitism. I don’t

know any Presbyterians (at least in our denomination) who think women shouldn’t be allowed to preach.

We see things differently than some who have gone before us. But we are not fundamentally different from them. We are still clay jars. The church will stumble. We will also hurt each other. It happens. We profess and trust a gospel that is always better than we are. We will fall short.

So we must live our faith with a spirit of humility. When those outside us offer critique, we should listen. We should pay attention. Our witness to Jesus Christ will never be perfect because we are clay jars. But a spirit of humility will keep us grounded and mindful of others. That’s a Christian posture to take.

But lastly, it is important to remember the complexity of the church’s story because it is a testimony to God’s faithfulness. If God had any inkling to give up on us, that would have happened by now. But what we know is that, in spite of our history, the Spirit of God still shows up among us.

I am leaving from worship today to go to the NEXT Church gathering in Atlanta. It is a gathering of leaders. We will worship; and we will share ideas; and we will challenge each other; and we will build relationships — all to strengthen the Presbyterian Church. Not because this church is perfect, but because in spite of our clay realities, God has placed treasure among us.

And the church has saved my life. The church has taught me that Jesus Christ is Lord and Sav-

ior. The church has called me to live toward a promised day. The church has shown me the honest truth of how the world is and the hope of how God’s redemptive love could make it.

So with humility, and sometimes repentance, I am bold to speak my love for the church — because in spite of her clay nature, God, for God’s own gracious reason, has filled her with treasure.

When I started this sermon, I asked you to think of something the church has given you. If you were able to do so, well, you know something of the treasure that I speak of.

¹Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought* (2002) p. 273.

²Evangelical has a different meaning today. Then it was simply a reference to being “protestant.”

³Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (1992, 2nd ed.), p. 169

⁴*The Presbyterian Enterprise* (1956), p. 215

⁵Robert Putnam, *American Grace* (2010)

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.