"The Cost of Being God’s Favorite Child"

A Sermon by Matt Fitzgerald
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Here are some things Christianity has given me: the comfort of the 23rd Psalm. Memories of Christmas morning as a child, watching my father adjust gifts beneath our tree as if the Queen of England were about to arrive, when it was just our family in pajamas. Hearing my own kids shout with glee on that same morning thirty-five years later.

A God to receive my gratitude and wretchedness. Singing Christ the Lord Has Risen today on Easter Sunday and at our wedding. The assumption of an ordered universe. The assurance that I am beloved in it. The promise that when death comes it will be defeated. Without Christianity I would have none of this.

What makes your list? Maybe it’s a friendship or motivation to pursue justice or your marriage or the security of your own salvation. Maybe it’s a particular hymn or anthem or the way our choir hits the descant on the doxology. Maybe it is as ephemeral as the holy ghost or as solid as your pew. Whatever makes your list, without Christianity you wouldn’t have it.

Or consider this: “All people are created in the image of God, but fall short of His glory. Therefore Christ came to offer an incomprehensible sacrifice in order to bring the gift of salvation to all human beings.” Say that out loud at a dinner party in Lincoln Park and I guarantee you some sophisticated atheist is going to raise his eyebrows.

But, that same cultured skeptic certainly believes that life has value and all people are equal. That belief didn't drop out of the sky, it grew out of Christian doctrine. No Jesus, no French Revolution. No Christ, no human rights.

Everything is contingent. Even Jesus. He's dependent too. Without Judaism, we wouldn't have him.

And we certainly wouldn't have the church we love. We sing hymns in church because Jews sang psalms in synagogues. More than that, we have churches because Jews have synagogues. Not every religion roots its people in a local congregation. But first-century Judaism did. And the first Christians were Jews. No synagogue, no Saint Pauls.

The Bible is clear: God chose Israel to be His people and not anyone else. It wasn't because they were the biggest or the most prestigious people. In fact they were tiny and obscure. God chose them because She chose them. And she did so unconditionally. “You are mine. My treasured possession. My firstborn child.” The claim was unconditional. Nothing could shake it. But it came with an obligation. God commanded obedience. “I love you. I know what you need. You need to live this way. You need to follow my law.”
Israel tried, but God’s law is demanding and the chosen people are... people. So Israel ignored God. In response He sent prophets to remind His people of who they were and whose they were. God sent Abraham. Moses. Elijah. Isaiah. Micah, Hosea, Daniel, Rachel. Rebecca.

God’s people listened to them. Sometimes. God agonized. She didn’t love her people in the abstract. She loved them every day. She cared about their pots and pans, their diet, the fabric of the clothes they wore, who they slept with, how they treated one another.

Who loves you like that? Your mother does.

Israel was God’s first adopted child and God loved Israel accordingly, like a mother loves her first baby. God tried to speak through floods and famines, manna and messengers, dreams and thunder. But his people ignored him. Or maybe his towering divinity left them unable to understand.

So, in Barbara Brown Taylor’s words, God designed a daring plan. He would become one of his chosen people. He would learn their lives inside and out. He would bring his love straight to them. He might suffer for this, but not the way that human beings suffer, not out of any sort of deficiency. No, God had a superabundance of love. So much love that heaven could not contain it. So much love that it spilled out over the top of the container we call omnipotence.

In late December God shed his heavenly robes. Taylor says, “When his midnight blue mantle fell, heaven’s floor opened to reveal a pasture speckled with sheep and startled shepherds. An angel gazed down at these terrified men and said “Fear not. For I am bringing you good news of great joy. God is with you.”

And in a nearby manger a newborn baby cried.

It wasn’t neutral flesh that Christ was born into. It was Jewish flesh. It wasn’t motherhood that bounced God on her knee. It was a Jewish mother. It wasn’t an abstract people that found God born into their midst. It was the Jewish people, God’s chosen people. And God chose them before he chose us.

Imagine Jewish Jesus considering gentiles for the first time. All these people that God didn’t choose, Romans worshiping their political leaders, pagans practicing a slot machine religion with an imaginary jackpot. Pathetic! Of course Jesus was moved to love gentiles. But he loved his own people first.

God’s love for the world grew out of God’s love for the Jews. Which might explain why Christianity hates Judaism.

I know you don’t. You’ve got Jewish friends just like I do. But our religion created anti-Semitism. No Christianity, no holocaust. In the first two months of 2017 there have been more than 100 bomb threats called in to Jewish community centers in the United States.
Jewish cemeteries have been desecrated. Jewish day schools have been threatened. I’d bet real money that behind every one of those threats there was a Christian on the phone.

It would be awful if this were happening to Buddhist day schools and Mormon cemeteries. But it’s about six million times more awful because it is Jews that are being terrorized.

There was a German leader who hated Jews, wanted their synagogues and schools should be set on fire, their prayer books destroyed, homes razed, property confiscated. Hitler? Göring? Himmler? No. Martin Luther.

Before and after Luther the Catholic Church was just as vehement. It wasn’t until Vatican II in 1965 that the Rome formally absolved Jews of collective guilt for the death of Christ. What garbage, meaningless absolution for an imaginary crime.

Our anti-Semitism isn’t always so obvious. Sometimes it’s subtle. Take a look at the third verse of “My Song is Love Unknown.” It’s one of our greatest hymns, “Crucify is all their breath, for blood and death they thirst and cry.” They. Not me. Not us. The Jews killed Jesus. Right? That’s what Mel Gibson believes anyhow. He made a whole movie about it. Jewish men with pointy beards in a villainous conspiracy. When that movie came out its tagline said, “It is as it was.”

But the cross isn’t history. Crucifixion is what happens whenever God’s vision of the world and ours collide. The crucifixion is not a story that we tell. It is a story that we live. Can confrontational, radical, marginal, needling, relentless, peaceful Jesus survive contemporary America? I don’t think so. We’re still muttering “Crucify, crucify” in tones that are less emphatic, but no less devastating for their subtlety.

“Crucify is all their breath?” If we want to blame a historic people for Christ’s death, maybe we should limit the effects of his resurrection to the three women who actually witnessed it. Meanwhile, the most politically correct hymnal in Christian history left that verse untouched, Mel Gibson is back on the red carpet collecting accolades and Jewish kindergartners in Virginia are running evacuation drills.

What is our problem? Why are we at odds with Judaism? Well, If Israel is God’s firstborn child, Christianity comes second. And little siblings tend to have complicated feelings for whoever came first.

When I was in high school I was friends with a boy named Mark. A rebel in a hand-me-down Izod shirt, a terrific athlete who hated team sports and the funniest person I have ever known. He could get you doubled over. Make you shake with laughter, spit coffee of your mouth. Or Mountain Dew. It was high school in the 80’s.
Mark had an older brother named Dan. Dan had the new Izod shirt and played hockey. Aside from that, they close characters in every respect. Except they weren’t close at all. Mark couldn’t stand his brother. I never understood why. And then I ate dinner at their house.

We sat down at the dining room table. Their dad spent ten minutes asking Dan about hockey practice. Then both parents peppered Dan with questions about whether he’d rather go to the Ivy League or stay in Minnesota for college. Then Dan was thanked for shoveling, the sidewalk sparkled. Daniel, Daniel, Daniel.

Finally, at a lull in the conversation Mark’s mom turned to me, “Matt, I was telling the boys the other day that I think Danny looks just like Tom Cruise. What do you think?”

I think that’s a weird question to ask a dinner guest! I looked across the table at Mark. His eyes were red and maybe he wanted to cry or maybe they were red with rage. He glared at his brother (who for the record, did look a bit like Tom Cruise).

Years later I told a psychiatrist friend about that dinner. I said that Dan must have had it so easy. She replied, “Oh it’s not good to be the first-born in that kind of family. Kids are like pancakes. You always burn the first one.”

I think what she meant is that family messes everyone up. Which suggests that Christians ought to have a heart for our older sibling. Mark probably didn’t appreciate that Daniel nearly broke himself in two trying to meet their mother’s expectations and follow all their father’s rules. Mark probably didn’t appreciate that Daniel softened his parents. First-born privilege comes at a cost.

When it comes to Judaism, that cost has been inflicted by the religion’s little siblings. The Jewish scholar Avi Bekar points out an obvious fact: both Christianity and Islam believe in Judaism’s God, while refusing to believe that Judaism is the true religion. In order to feel good about ourselves, we have to invalidate Judaism’s choosiness. By exterminating the Jewish people. Or wiping Israel off the map. Or pretending that Jesus wasn’t a Jew. That’s what I do every time I celebrate communion without mentioning Passover which is something I’ve done at least 250 times, each time my silence scrubs the Jewishness of Jesus as if it were somehow unsavory.

Bekar calls this the cost of choosiness.

All so we can feel that God loves us too!

That’s the absurd thing. We aren’t talking about a delicious pie with only eight pieces and nine folks at the dinner table. We’re talking about the love of God. It isn’t going to run out. There’s enough for everyone and then some.
And we aren't talking about Mark and Danny's broken parents, or even parents that are good enough or better. We're talking about the perfect love of God.

We shouldn't be jealous of Judaism for getting the first taste; we should be impressed. We shouldn't distance ourselves from the Jewish experience, we should fight for it like family members quick to protect a blood relative we love.

Marc Maron once said that the people with the greatest taste in music always have an older brother or an older sister. Someone who pulled them aside and, “Yeah, Justin Bieber’s ok, but you should check out Prince. And if you like ‘1999’ try David Bowie next.”

David Bowie's great. But our older sibling knows something much better. We should listen up. And we should ask, “What has it been like to know the truth of the universe since the moment Abram first heard the voice of God?” Amen.