

Proper 16 Year A 2023

This past Thursday evening I, along with a good number of All Saints folks, and some five hundred or so other seekers from various denominations and traditions, attended the Dill lecture at Dauphin Way Methodist Church given by Amy-Jill Levine. Dr. Levine is professor of New Testament studies at Vanderbilt Divinity School, and professor of New Testament and Jewish Religious studies at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace. She is also a fellow at Cambridge University in the UK in Jewish-Christian relations. Though her expertise is New Testament literature, Dr. Levine is a Jew.

That might seem odd to some of us. Why would a devout Jew spend her professional life teaching the interpretation of Christian scripture? Why would a Christian school of divinity employ such a person? The short answer is that Jesus was a Jew; a devout Jew; and his followers were Jews. The cultural and theological context of his life, and teaching, and ministry was Judaism. All of his teaching, including the parables were interpretations of Torah, the Jewish Law. In other words, Jesus didn't invent a new religion, he was rearticulating his own within the context of his day and age.

In her introduction. Dr. Levine told us that, as a Jew, she doesn't follow Jesus as her "Lord and Savior" because, as she put it, her "heart is full of Torah." I love that. Not only is Torah the prescriptive moral Law of Judaism... some 600 plus of them, if you're counting, but Torah also refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. So Torah also includes the stories of the beginnings of a people in relationship with God; their ambiguous relationship with God over their history; stories of

shame and redemption; of freedom and liberation; of being lost in the wilderness, and found. At its heart the Torah tells a story of how it was that God chose to inhabit a people... a story that demands to be interpreted imaginatively, and reinterpreted given new knowledge and experience and new context. Dr. Levine told us that for Christians to ignore Hebrew Scripture is to ignore the very faith of Jesus. Suffice it to say, she, a Jew, is as a matter of practice, a follower of Jesus. Because her heart full of Torah.

Today's Gospel reading in Matthew is popularly called the confession of Peter. Peter, who represents the church, when asked who Jesus is to him, recalls the legacy of the prophets of the tradition; and he names Jesus the messiah, the anointed one, the legendary, if not mythological figure, who throughout biblical history, was the one who would establish God's rule on earth; the one who would raise up the poor and the brokenhearted; the one who would bring justice in the face of oppression; the one to establish Shalom, the peace of God that passes all understanding. Matthew, the writer, in the persona of Peter, is full of Torah; full of the vision articulated by scribes over Israel's venerable history; which is to say, full of God's vision for the world. God's is a heart full of Love. And Love is the imaginative vision, a vision that crosses the human constructs of religion; a vision embedded in our DNA since the beginning of all beginnings.

For Jews and for Jesus Torah is the means through which God loves the world. One of many things that Judaism can teach us, is that salvation is not personal. Jesus is not a personal savior. Salvation, which is at the heart of Torah, is about the vitality and the sustainability of

community. Love always defers to the good of the other; and Love's goal is to bring all into the community of God's abundance. Modern Christianity is obsessed with the notion of personal salvation... personal salvation so that one might go to heaven; but that's not what Jesus is teaching. Jesus is teaching Torah, and Torah demands that we serve the good of the community, however and wherever community is defined. If anyone suffers in the community, then we all suffer. That is why Jesus is always deferring to the least of us: the imprisoned, the poor, the social outcast, the sick... and not for their sake only, but for the sake of the community entire. God's vision of life on earth is Shalom for all people, a kingdom, as it were, of equals, a kingdom of shared dignity; a kingdom of abundance. To have faith, good people, is to have hearts full of Love for the broken of our world.

And then, perhaps the most important point to this reading: That heaven and earth are one and the same. Heaven is not a place in a utopian future, nor is it a place we go in the next life. Certainly we believe in life beyond our earthly existence... a life in the infinite heart of God... but that's not heaven. Heaven is here and now. Our practicing the faith, the vocation of our brimful hearts, bears the unfolding history of both heaven and earth, one history, fraught with high drama, uncertainty, and pathos... and as improbable as it may seem, joy. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. This is the key to the kingdom of God, which Jesus bequeaths to the church; that Love is the life force that joins heaven and earth; that heaven and earth are the same place, in which Love contends with opposition and evil. There is no utopian future; we bring Love to

bear on earth as it is in heaven, with the faith that evil will not prevail against the unconquerable power of Love.

And just to say it again: Our faith demands our being in the public square because we are witnesses to the Love that is God that fills our hearts. Faith is not a private matter. To say that our faith is not political, in the true sense of that word, is to say we have no faith at all. It is Love that will shape the fragile trajectory of history. Our faith demands that we serve the good and the true, and Jesus, the Torah, teaches us that the way, the means, is to love our neighbor first, to welcome the outsider, to attend to the weakest among us... whereby we build a vital and sustainable and just community. The kingdom of God is not some evocation of magic. It is plainly and simply the building of a just community, a just world. The good of the whole, not our own good, is what we serve first; which means that Salvation is not something to possess; it is our very vocation. Our context, our moment in time and space, is that we live in a democratic republic, with empowering freedom, so we must participate in it, imaginatively, with humility, and with courage. Love is honest and true, and God knows our world needs honesty and truth right now. Honesty, truth, gratitude, justice, kindness, perspective... all rudiments for raising up community as God envisions it. We have been baptized into a vision of community building.

The story of Torah is that God has descended from the heavens, from the mountaintops, and has made God's dwelling place among us; and not unlike the vision of the New Testament literature, it is a story of Incarnation. God inhabiting a people. God's people bearing God's very

life to the world... healing, restoring, dignifying, raising the proverbial dead to life... We, brothers and sisters, are the means of salvation. All people of any culture; of any religion... or of no religion at all... if their hearts are full of Love then they are heralds of the world's salvation. The Torah, and thus Jesus, is clear in this message... we follow creatively God's vision for the world, so that our love enlightens the darkness; so that all may apprehend heaven loosed in earth; or that we are awakened to the reality that we live amid profound blessing; that Eden is all around us; and that such blessing groans to be shared, and to be praised.

Matthew, in his Gospel gives us our charge. We have been given the keys to the kingdom: Hearts filled with Torah. Hearts that bear a sacred story. Hearts filled with love.