

## **The Jews**

Isaiah 40:21-31  
I Corinthians 9:16-23

As Christians we have inherited our religious identity from a people the world does not know how to handle. I had a Jewish great-grandmother, Frederica, who emigrated from Austria to St. Louis, where she met her future husband, a Roman Catholic. They got married in the St. Louis County courthouse, not far from where the Arch would be built some 50 years later. She died a couple of years before I was born in 1959. Not even my eldest cousin, Diane, who has done the family genealogy, knows whether Frederica practiced Judaism, Catholicism, some other brand of Christianity, or nothing at all. What we do know is this: had she remained a practicing Jew, it might have caused trouble in the family and even in the neighborhood. (They moved “out” to the suburb of Webster Groves, where Chuck and Sandy Culp grew up. Webster does not have a synagogue. I do not know whether it ever has.)

Whenever and wherever the Jews have gone they have tended to remain separate, unique. Though after a couple of generations they fit in culturally, and they certainly do well academically, they often do not really assimilate. In my childhood and youth my family frequently moved. We usually landed in suburbs with significant Jewish populations. I attended many the Bar- and Bat-Mitzvah. For years I conducted a correspondence with Chris Roth, my Jewish friend who now lives in Prairie Village, a

suburb of Kansas City. We haven't written each other since October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, when Hamas ambushed Jews in southern Israel. Since then, the Jews have busied themselves killing Palestinians. As I have told a number of you, from my perspective neither side is right; both are dead wrong.

And I mean dead. As in tens of thousands of dead. And why? Because both sides fervently believe their gods have given them the land over which they fight. And because both sides nurture hatred over past evils committed in the attempt to “win” that land. Among the many tragic facets of this story is that this land stinks. It has beaches on the Mediterranean, but the waters there are often fetid with bacterial maladies and sharks. Lots and lots of sharks. Meanwhile, on land, the climate is horribly hot from May through October, and arid. So arid both the Jews and the Palestinians have had to resort to drilling wells so deep that only highly-specialized equipment can do the job. Seasonal winds blow sand across it from the Arabian Peninsula. Frankly, if I owned a lot there I would gladly sell it for pennies on the dollar. But the Jews and the Palestinians have been locked in a struggle for it far too long for either side to quit. It has long since become a matter of pride. Personal pride. Macho pride. Religious pride.

“To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews,” the Apostle Paul wrote to a church made up of Jews and Gentiles. They lived in the cosmopolitan city Corinth, on a critical business and military crossroads. Historians believe Corinth was the largest city in Greece at the time, with a population of over 100,000, larger than

Athens. Paul had walked into town some years earlier. He had preached about Jesus as the Messiah in local synagogues. He ended up preaching the same on the streets, because too many of the Jews could not bear to listen to the Gospel. Moved by the imperative of God's calling (which he had experienced in a dramatic vision of God speaking to him), he “(became) all things to all people, that I might by some means save some. I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”

In the earliest days, it appears most Christians still considered themselves Jews. A few of the great debates presented in the Book of Acts—the first Christian history book—cover this very ground. In order to become a follower of Jesus, would you not have to become a Jew? But Paul, a Jew, a *Pharisee*, decided God had revealed to him that this was unnecessary. Being a Christian, unlike being a Jew, does not require a particular ethnic heritage—or absent that, a rigorous conversion process. No, being a Christian requires faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Nothing more and nothing less. And it turns out that this is a bit of a high bar to cross any more.

I want to thank Murray Pate for drawing my attention to a recent article in the National Review. It documents that the religious “nones” have become more numerous in the USA than evangelicals and Catholics, the two largest religious cohorts in our nation. (The “nones” are those who consider themselves atheistic--“I believe in no god”--or agnostic--“I do not know what I believe”.) Plus, the younger the population, the less religious they describe themselves as being. None of this should surprise us. The evidence for it surrounds us. In fact, one of the things people who

visit this congregation often comment on is how many children we have. In other words, many churches do not. So while we must not delude ourselves into thinking it is our magnificence that has drawn some who might otherwise be nones, we must thank God for the blessing of having them here.

And we must decide what we intend to do about the calling we share with the Apostle Paul. How can we become better advocates for people outside the faith to enter into it? He started with his fellow Jews and expanded his witness to Greeks and others across a wide spectrum of religions and traditions in Corinth. We do not face the same demographics. No, we face the nones. Many of whom used to attend churches. Many of whom have legitimate questions about our behaviors as followers of Jesus. Many of whom have experienced pains that cause them to question God. Many of whom worry about how they will pay their bills even without adding a regular gift to some church. How can we encourage them to make the commitments we have made, to worship Jesus together and to serve his purposes in the world?

It turns out a great deal of thought and research have been poured into this question. And it turns out there's an answer. People are looking for authenticity, for genuineness. They want to see whether we mean what we say, whether we live out what we profess. Follow Jesus, speak about him when you can, and you will become "a Jew to the Jews". You will assist in God's desire for all to come into a saving relationship with God in the form of Jesus. Get real, and we will attract people. There is so much inauthenticity in our world. Be authentic, and let us see what happens.