

## SEE THE HATE, CHOOSE TO LOVE

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John 6:35, 41-51

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Like many high schools, the high school where I attended had an annual musical every spring. One year it was *Fiddler on the Roof*, and I remember loving that musical. It's possible, though, that it was somehow an abbreviated version, or that I didn't fully understand some of the major plot points or themes, because when I saw it as an adult, I was struck by how truly tragic the story is. You'll remember that this is the story of a man named Tevye, his wife, and his daughters, set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in rural Russia. What is important to remember is that this family, and their whole community, is Jewish. The tradition of their community is to have the matchmaker find a husband for each of Tevye's daughters, but as the musical progresses, the three eldest daughters fall in love and break the tradition of using a matchmaker and instead ask for their father's blessing to marry the man they have fallen in love with. And each daughter's request gets harder and harder for Tevye to accept.

The eldest daughter falls in love with a poor tailor, but he is from their community, Tevye has known him all his life and knows that he is a good man, and so, at the end of the first act of the musical, Tevye's eldest daughter marries the penniless tailor. During their wedding reception, though, the Russian soldiers come through the party, terrorize the guests and destroy the presents. This was one small way that they kept the Jewish communities from forgetting that they were not really welcome in Russia. Tevye's second daughter pushes Tevye's comfort zone even farther when she falls in love with a revolutionary. He believes that change is coming to Russia, and he hopes to be a part of this change. To Tevye, whom, you'll remember opens the whole musical with the fantastic song upholding the virtues of tradition, this is a hard pill to swallow. But Tevye's love for his daughter and desire to see her happy wins out, and Tevye gives his daughter his blessing to marry this revolutionary, even though this revolutionary has since been exiled to Siberia, and the daughter will be moving there to be with him, so Tevye may never see her again.

The third daughter, though, takes Tevye to his breaking point, because she falls in love with a Russian soldier, who was Christian. Unlike the first two daughters, who pushed Tevye beyond his comfort zone but fell in love with Jewish men, this third daughter crosses a line that Tevye cannot accept. The daughter and her soldier met when there was a group of soldiers picking on the girl, and this one soldier came to her defense, and their love blossomed and was genuine. They were from such conflicting backgrounds that it seemed impossible for their love to last, and yet it did. When the daughter asked for Tevye's blessing to marry this soldier, Tevye refused. Not long after there was another raid on their town, and this time they were told of an incoming pogrom, that is, where Jews in Russia, and other parts of Europe, were forced to leave their homes and towns and move somewhere else, simply because they were Jewish and were no longer welcome where they were. Tevye, knowing that he would lose his home and his homeland, and not willing to also lose his daughter through his anger of her choice, finally wished God's blessing upon her union with the Christian Russian soldier, just before the two fled

to Poland to escape the pogrom themselves. As the musical ends, Tevye and the rest of his family immigrate to the United States.

The musical does an amazing job of showcasing the theme of hate. Humans hate change, so much so that it's a cliché. Those things which fly in the face of our traditions are not easily tolerated, and the people who bring about these changes can easily be seen as the enemy. This was certainly how Tevye first saw the poor tailor who wanted to marry his eldest daughter for love. People also have a propensity to hate "the other," those people who are not like ourselves. We can see them as a threat, or simply dislike them because we don't understand them. This is certainly how Tevye saw the Christian Russian soldier who wanted to marry his third daughter.

But it's also how the Russia of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the Jewish communities living there, as "the other," who were not participating in the Christian traditions of the Orthodox Church, or marrying their daughters into good Russian families. In fact, Russia, and other European countries, had these raids regularly, where families were terrorized and threatened, and executed pogroms, forcing the Jewish communities to relocate and never really feel settled or embraced by their homeland. It takes a lot of hate for a whole community to be treated this way.

What was so hard to bare after watching *Fiddler on the Roof* was the knowledge that these pogroms, and this historical hate towards the Jewish people, largely comes from misinterpretations from passages like today's Gospel reading. Today's Gospel talks about the how "the Jews" began to complain about Jesus, because Jesus said, "I am the bread of life." This is a really bizarre way for the author to have put this sentiment, because it makes it sound like "the Jews" were only one subset of the people gathered that day. Instead, as we all know, Jesus was Jewish, and his disciples and other followers were Jewish. Everyone present in this moment in time was Jewish, not to mention that the author was probably Jewish and the original audience to whom this Gospel was written was mostly Jewish. It would be like if I wrote a story about "the Americans" and talked about "the Americans" as if I weren't a part of that group. So you can see the puzzle here. There are many theories as to why the author described those who were antagonistic to Jesus as "the Jews," and there's one that rises to the top for me.

But first, it's important to know one piece of important history: the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70AD. If you go to Jerusalem now, one wall remains from that Temple – the same Temple that Jesus knew and loved – it is the Western Wall, also called the Wailing Wall, because people still mourn its destruction. It is the holiest site in all of Judaism. The Romans destroyed the Temple as an example of their power and to keep the Jewish population from ever trying to revolt against the Romans. The Jewish religious leaders then had an existential and spiritual crisis: how could God allow the Temple to be destroyed? God, they decided, must be punishing them, but for what? One possible explanation was that this growing group of Jesus followers – who were all Jews at that time, again, because Jesus was Jewish and his original followers were all Jewish – that this growing group of people were wrong about the Messiah having come, and God was angry that this group of people weren't being adequately condemned by the religious authorities. And so, after the Temple was destroyed, the Jewish religious authorities condemned this growing group of Jesus followers, making it so that the Jesus followers had to choose: would they renounce Jesus and remain Jewish, or break off from their Jewishness and begin their own religion? Well, you know what happened, this gave birth to

the religion of Christianity. And while all this was going on, the Gospel according to John was being written, and so as to solidify which camp the Gospel was in, and even though the author and audience had recently been Jewish, the Gospel was written such that “the Jews” were “the other.”

But what’s so interesting is that in the midst of this animosity of today’s Gospel reading, where the Jewish religious leaders were so critical of Jesus, Jesus still loves them. Jesus still offers himself to them, as the bread of life of which they can partake. Much like Tevye, who was surrounded by hate, much of which was directed at him and his community, and yet still chose to love his daughters and put their happiness above his own, Jesus looked at the hate of those who felt threatened by his new and different teachings, and he loved them.

The author of this Gospel did not include this story as propaganda for his side of the post-Temple religious debate, he included this story to show that the way of Jesus was to look hate in the face, and choose love.

The way of Jesus is to see the hate, and choose to love.

At our baptism, we take vows, or they are taken on our behalf and we renew them at our Confirmation. In these vows, we make such promises as to persevere in resisting evil, seek and serve Christ in all persons, strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being. At our baptism, we choose to take these things on because in choosing these as the cornerstone of how we live our lives, we grow more and more like Christ. In resisting evil, serving Christ in all persons, and striving for peace and justice, we see the hate in our world that divides us and seeks to negate the dignity of every human being, and we promise to make every effort to choose to love.

The way of Jesus is to see the hate, and choose to love.

I wish we lived in a world where there was no hate, no division, no “the other.” I’m sure you do, too. I wish the world didn’t need us so desperately to live into the vows that we take at baptism, but you and I both know, it does. In Jesus’ day, in Jesus’ lifetime, there was so much hate, but Jesus saw the hate and chose to love. In the early days of the church there was so much division and animosity, but Jesus called his disciples to choose the way of love. In our day, there is no place where the power of hate cannot be felt. And yet, we know of a force far more powerful, a force that we take our place within at baptism, the power of Jesus’ love. We, like the early church, are called to follow in the way of Jesus, and see the hate, but choose the love.

This is our calling, and this is what the world needs from us: to see the hate, but choose the love.