

Jude 1:1-2, 5-8, 11-13, 16, 19-21 (NASB)

THE BAD GUYS (The Adversaries)

And Jesus began to say to them, "Take heed that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray." (Mark 13:5-6)

Who is leading whom astray? It is a hard thought, but we can hardly read even this short letter from Jude without realizing that this is a major issue behind his concerns. This is not just my "take" on this. "Jude is concerned for the salvation of those to whom he is writing and is afraid that in their naiveté they might be seduced by false teachers." (*Commentary on Jude*, Theophylact (1050-1108), Archbishop of Ohrid, in what is now Bulgaria.)

Do you know that I worry and pray a lot about not leading you astray? Of course, in our Congregational tradition, some of the heat is taken off me because we assume that you study and think and pray yourselves and don't just take anything because I say it. But even some of you get lazy enough to let me do your thinking and believing for you. That's a no-no! As Paul says: "*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*" (Philippians 2:12) In much of the Christian world today, it is assumed that people are unfaithful, even enemies of Christ, unless they swallow whatever the priest, bishop, or preacher is telling them ... and swallow it pretty much undigested.

Others, to be sure, are in no danger at all of being misled. They are not *going* anywhere. Nobody can tell them anything or lead them anywhere. They think it will keep them "safe" if they refuse to commit to anything or participate in any form of the Christian Life and community. Of course, that means that if anybody is right, even Jesus Himself, then they are wrong. But many of them are quite certain that the Jesus they do not believe in – and know little about – will be duty-bound to forgive them.

Not only do I pray and study hard in the hope of not misleading you, but I assume that my perspective is flawed in places. Obviously I cannot tell where those places are or I would have corrected them. That "correcting" has been going on all my life, so I don't expect it to stop now. Nevertheless, I trust the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord to go on guiding,

correcting, forgiving, and sometimes even laughing with us when our foolishness comes to light. So I tell you the best I know, and trust you to take it from there. But most of you already know that.

I have spent these summer Sundays talking to you about Jude. Focusing on the Book of Jude is a wonderful study of a very serious and dedicated Christian of the early church, whose perspective is clearly flawed but who nevertheless reminds us of many important things. So as always, we try to wend our way through his truth and error, trying to learn what we can and discard what we must. The notion that there is or ever has been a clear and certain body of belief to which all Christians adhere is a total myth. It cannot be maintained by anyone who knows anything of our history. We are still writing systematic theologies! If one that has already been written is correct, why do we keep writing more and more of them? Why do books keep pouring off the presses, if everybody already knows the real and inerrant truth? Christian faith and belief are far too dynamic to be bottled, canned, or patented, and assembly-line approaches are false to the very principles of love and truth – as anybody who has ever been in love, or who has ever been called by Jesus, will testify.

Next week I will tell you some of the things I appreciate most from Jude. Today I must mention some of his comments which, though they may be interesting, I do not agree with. While my agreement is of small concern, I will tell you why Jesus would not agree with him either. That is not of small concern.

First of all, this fascinating comment from verse 5: Jesus saved a people out of the land of Egypt, and then destroyed those who did not believe. I understand the motive behind the claim. Jude cares about the church (which to him is still people – the people of Jesus), and he is very worried about what he considers to be wrong and evil trends making headway in the church. His motives are good. He wants to save people from error, and destruction. Good motives no longer impress me as much as they used to. Almost everybody has them, including some of my worst antagonists. People with good motives can even do pretty bad things – if they think it's serving a good cause or getting the right results, or at least the results they *think* are right.

Jude is a really good illustration of this very thing. He has made his point and now he will threaten anybody who does not agree with him: Jesus will punish and destroy you if you do not agree, just like He did

before – back when the Hebrews had just come out of Egypt with Moses. And Jude is going to list a number of punishment/destruction episodes to persuade or stun any opposition into accepting his perspective. By the way, it worked. Not perfectly, but quite well. My point is not that Jude was ineffective. It worked, and it is still working in terms of persuading people to be afraid enough to agree. The question is: Does this kind of fear – do these kinds of threats – work to build up the Kingdom, and bring people to a clearer and better relationship with Jesus Christ?

Many translations have switched to “Lord” or “God” in verse 5, because Jesus back at the time of Moses seems an anachronism. But many older manuscripts, and some very fine modern translations (English Standard Version), retain “Jesus” in this verse. It reminds us that in the early days of the church, there was no New Testament, and that the Bible for all early Christians was the Old Testament. Therefore, many of them read Jesus back into everything. And since the early church came to believe in the Preexistent Christ (*“In the beginning was the Word ...”* (John 1:1)), it was a simple step from there to thinking of Jesus as having always been present in all circumstances. By such logic, Moses may have been the actual leader at the time of the Exodus, but it was Jesus behind the scenes who was really in charge of what was going on. That perspective is well documented and defended in many Christian groups to this day. I am not trying to claim that this is despicable; I would point out, however, that it is endlessly confusing. If we thus “Christianize” the Old Testament, we can never hear it as Old Testament. The confusion is worst at the point of trying to understand what the coming of Jesus brought into the world. If Jesus was always and already here, then when Jesus of Nazareth showed up, it didn’t make any difference. It was just “same old, same old.” There was no contrast. We always expected the Messiah, and the prophecies had told us what He would be like – and it was, and is, all working out according to plan and prediction and predestination. No surprises.

Some people are very comforted by the thought that Old Testament prophecy told it all ahead of time. The less human choice there is – that is, the less free will – then the safer they feel, and the less chance there is for any of us to mess things up. I don’t know – it looks pretty messed up to me. It would be nice if I could believe none of it was our responsibility. But no free choice – and no responsibility for our choices – also means no meaning or purpose to any of it. What we like or dislike about philosophical theories probably doesn’t change the truth one whit. But it does change our perceptions of reality, and therefore our responses to it.

I would remind you that Jesus was a total surprise to everybody, and pretty much still is. Neither Judaism nor any Jews within it expected a Messiah anything like what Jesus was really like. They were even more surprised by how He went about His mission and ministry. Nor did anybody expect the Messiah to teach what Jesus taught, to believe as Jesus believed, or to die or rise again. We even had to invent a “Second Coming” to get things back on track and turn everything back around to what we wanted and expected in the first place: a Messiah who would massacre everybody who did not agree with Him, and who would take over and right all the wrongs and fix all the evil – so we wouldn’t have to be bothered with any spiritual growth or changes in ourselves. In short, if Jesus had been what Judaism expected, all the Jews would have believed in Him. Do I need to point out that this was not and is not the case?

Now Jude blithely claims that it was Jesus who saved the people out of Egypt, and then destroyed all those who didn’t get with the program. Moreover, He will destroy all of you, if you don’t get with the right beliefs and practices that I, Jude, am setting before you in this letter. Clearly that is his claim and message. Now, you may think it strange, as I do, that at the time Jude is writing, it has not yet occurred to him that a Messiah of grace, love, and the Cross might not act according to the blueprint worked out for Him in apocalyptic patterns generations before Jesus Himself was born. (Especially, as has been pointed out, in the Messianic prophecies of First Enoch that Jude still clings to.) Is it not important for us to notice that it is precisely this apocalyptic type of pre-Jesus Messiah that is still being proclaimed by Jude – and not Jesus Himself? How can Jesus ever get away from the preset Messianic patterns that were established for Him before He ever came here?!

Well, some have moved with Jesus beyond the former expectations – to an entirely New Covenant of grace and love. But many cling desperately to the old patterns, thinking that everybody who doesn’t agree with them is against Jesus Himself. *“Many will come in my name ... leading many astray.”* (Matthew 24:5; Mark 13:6) But who is misleading whom? It seems clear to me that Jesus Himself disagreed passionately with the former Messianic expectations. Nothing could prove that more dramatically or thoroughly than the Cross.

I might also point out that Jude was wrong (incorrect, if you like that better). That is, Jesus did not destroy all the wrong-thinking, wrong-acting people like Jude promised He would. We have gone on with our struggles to be faithful for lo these many centuries – sometimes right,

sometimes wrong; sometimes perplexed, sometimes repentant. But Jude was wrong! His dire threats were mistaken. The faithful got punished and persecuted at least as much the unfaithful, and often more so. And to this day, nothing we know of has been resolved in this realm. If we are faithful to Jesus, it is not because of Jude's threats. It is because we have believed Jesus, and felt His love, and have come to trust and love Him in return. And some of the passion and the power of that love are precisely because Jesus is *not* like the Messiah that was predicted (or prophesied).

Now, I might wish, on a bad day, that Jude had been right. It would have saved a lot of mayhem and trouble. No more struggles in the Middle East, or with terrorists, or in our own backyards. But Jude was not right. He was wrong about the timeline, and he was wrong about the nature and purpose of Jesus. A fair number of Christians in our day sound just like Jude did in his day – and they are just as wrong today as Jude was in his day. We did not get the Messiah we expected. He is never going to turn into the bloodthirsty, fiendish, throw-them-into-Hell Messiah that is being preached and proclaimed in so many ways and places still today. Jesus is full of grace and truth – full of love and mercy – full of forgiveness and endless new chances for anyone who repents. And if we do not come to trust that, we can never come to love Him. Admire, respect, fear, on some levels, perhaps ... but not love.

In any case, why should Jesus come again, when He is already here – yet most of us won't pay enough attention to Him to turn from doing things our own way, even for three or four full days in a row? "We won't be truly faithful until You *make* us" – in other words, until He comes as the Messiah we wanted in the first place. But, says Jesus (at least for the past two thousand years): That is not faith. That is coercion. I am never coming that way. I want you in love and in trust – or not at all. Look around you. What is really happening? Never mind what somebody is telling you is supposed to happen. Who are the people coming to me, and coming with me? They are coming because they want to – in free will, by their own free choice. In all the history of the world, have I ever forced anybody – have I ever made them do anything? They are coming to me because my WAY is the best they have ever seen or known. That is not what First Enoch pictured. But that is how I really work. I have already come to you. But from the day of my Resurrection on – if you want me, you have to come to me too.

Of course, I enjoy Jude's sermon more than those who don't know the Bible. At least he knows the stories and the traditions, even if he has never gotten very far out of the Old Testament into the New. **Cain** killed his brother, and Jude knows that some of these Gnostic teachings will kill the souls of those deceived by them. **Balaam** cursed God's people for money (until God turned Balaam's tongue around), and Jude thinks greed is a pathetic motive for betraying God. **Korah** seized a teaching authority which God had not granted him. Jude uses him as an example of all the false prophets and teachers who have plagued the covenant people from one end of the Scriptures to the other.

And then Jude turns mean, and I love it. That is, the word pictures he uses are telling and creative. These people (the adversaries who have wormed their way into the church) are hidden reefs in your love feasts. What happens to a ship that hits a hidden reef? (Imagine being an ancient mariner, without good maps or charts, never mind GPS.) These people are clouds without water. They may look good, but they carry no benefit. They are autumn trees without fruit. If a tree is ever going to have fruit, of course it will be in the autumn. But these people are doubly dead – they have neither fruit nor root. They produce nothing of value themselves, and they have cut themselves off from Jesus – meaning, they will not produce anything of value in the future either. The ocean is powerful and impressive, but these “wild waves” leave nothing but a disgusting layer of foam from their licentiousness. “Wandering stars” in all probability refers to shooting stars. They are a mere blip on the screen of the heavens. Faithful stars know and stay their course, and will be there night after night until creation itself comes to an end. (There are astronomers today who would argue with some of the details, but Jude didn't know any of them.)

And finally, they are grumblers – always finding fault, pointing out other people's shortcomings, and causing divisions – yet arrogant (because they only notice other people's flaws), and they are quite willing to flatter people if it will get them what they want. Aren't we glad that nobody is like that anymore?

In this crossfire between scorn, threats, and sarcasm, Jude suggests that his hearers side with him and return their churches to a more faithful and moral stance. Did I leave out anything? Oh yes; doggone it. There is the bit about Sodom and Gomorrah. There had been this huge conflagration where the Dead Sea now is. It was very, very impressive to

the ancient world, and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah had been completely destroyed. Looking around for a reason, they never thought it might be about bitumen pits and gases, and maybe a lightning bolt or something to set it off. No, it all blew up to punish people for the gang-rape described in Genesis 19. Do you really still believe that natural disasters are specific punishments for specific human sins? Vesuvius erupted and buried Pompeii because some individuals were misbehaving there more than in any of the other cities of the empire? How does God expect us to track the message, when there is so much sin going on everywhere (*“All have sinned and come short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23)) and he only punishes one place?

Next time Mount Rainier blows, what will we decide was wrong with Seattle? And the next time the San Andreas Fault really lets go? Well, we know what’s wrong around here.

In any case, among more conservative Christians (who, unlike most liberal Christians, *do* read all of the Bible, all of the time), Jude is one of the bastions cited against homosexuals. Well, they would claim to have nothing against homosexuals, just against homosexuality. Riggght. If it weren’t for the continued diatribe, from both sides, I could probably leave the topic for other times and places. But the church is burning far more energy on this topic than it is on prayer, conversion, commitment, Christology, and a host of other things that heterosexual and homosexual Christians should be working on together. So it is and has been a hot topic, and while I don’t like the manner, I like the fact that our society is dealing with it more and more – finally – and in the open.

Personally, I haven’t been directly involved in any of these controversies or arguments ... except for the past thirty-five years. Some denominations are just coming into hot battles on the subject, but we were in the thick of it when I was Conference Moderator here back in 1973. Before the ’70s, most conversations were quiet and private. I have never served a church, including this one, which did not have homosexuals in its membership. And not all, but always some of those homosexuals have been deeply committed Christians – prayerfully, biblically, morally, vocationally – and just as concerned as any of us about walking the Christian Path, loving God, and helping others. Because of the atmosphere and teachings of much of the Christian church in our time, many of them have been greatly concerned, at least in weak moments, about whether Christianity – and the grace of Jesus

Christ – was applicable to them. I think that is tragic, but I do not say that to them. I simply take them to the Scriptures – including to some that trouble them most.

This is not the time or forum for any fair treatment of this topic, but I want to make four brief comments.

1.) Often people quote some Scripture passage or some rule against homosexuality. I know two better passages and better rules than any they may be using:

“And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, ‘Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’” (Acts 10:45-47)

“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?” (Acts 11:15-17)

As is clear in the early chapters of Acts, the Holy Spirit is inviting and welcoming a vast array of people into the church – people whom none of the apostles at first imagined could ever become full members of the church. This is not mere theory to me. I have known too many homosexual Christians who have received the Holy Spirit as surely and powerfully as I have, so who am I to challenge the acceptance of the Holy Spirit?

2.) In many places and ways across the land, homosexual and heterosexual Christians are finding and feeling themselves pitted against each other. Who does that sort of thing? Do we not need each other? Have we time and energy enough to fight *each other*, when there is so much work to do, people to convert, and people to care about, love, and rescue from the clutches of Satan? Why is Christ divided? Well, we know why, but are we helpful participants in such divisions?

3.) I do not like it when heterosexual friends are promiscuous, or abandoned, or broken-hearted. Nor am I an advocate for celibacy for any of them. I like it very much when they fall in love; when they establish solid, committed, lifetime bonds of love and faithfulness; when they find partners to serve with, and follow Jesus with, and grow old with. And in fact, I am more than sad when this kind of life eludes them, or is interrupted for whatever reason, or is taken from them. Why would I not like this same kind of life for my homosexual friends? Do I think they would be better off blighted, promiscuous, abandoned, celibate, or without a partner? Is that my idea of loving my neighbor as myself, when I myself have a partner who means more than all the world to me? Wake up! Love other Christians. Value the love they have for you. If you want something to fight, fight Satan.

4.) And I probably don't need to add this, but I will. I do not for a minute think that all homosexuals are Christians, or are behaving correctly, or have their acts together. Most people I know, gay or straight, do not have long-term, committed love-bonds with loyal and faithful partners, even if they desperately want to. I suspect that's why Jesus came – because we all need converting, saving, forgiving, and redeeming. So now we are going to divide up again into first-class and second-class Christians, or into “the acceptable” and “the unacceptable”? Must we always be polarized? All conservatives are against stem-cell research and abortion and homosexuality ... and all liberals are for them? I do not like secular creeds or group-think any better than I like religious creeds or group-think. How about you?

Finally, Jude moves on to better things: *“Beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.”* Now he's cooking again. How about us?

Perhaps we should end with some thoughts from Paul: *“From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.”* (II Corinthians 5:16-17)