

Teaching contempt: Neighborly alternatives

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [August 24, 2004](#) issue

Everyone needs someone to tell her she has spinach in her teeth, preferably before she has spent 15 minutes wondering why her table companions are so taken with her smile. One friend recently crossed a gender boundary to help me with a similar problem lower down.

“XYZ,” he said, when we rose from eating lunch together.

“Huh?” I said.

“Examine your zipper,” he said, and he was right. The fly on my Eddie Bauer summer sale jeans was standing wide open. As embarrassed as I was, I was grateful to him for being direct with me. He not only saved me from exposing myself all the way back to my car but also from spending the rest of the afternoon wondering if he had noticed.

We all need help seeing what we do not see, which is one reason we practice faith in community. By giving us those who view scripture differently than we do, God delivers us from the worship of our own readings. By joining us with those who have been broken in different places than we have, God offers us guides who can spot danger where we may not. By seating us at table with those who see us differently than we see ourselves, God makes sure we have someone to tell us to XYZ.

Last month I received a letter from a doctor in California who had recently listened to some of my sermons on tape. He had borrowed one set from the rector of his Episcopal church, he wrote, and had liked it well enough to order an older set. The difference between the two made him want to share a few thoughts with me.

“I think you’ve come a long way,” he wrote, adding that he knew that sounded presumptuous but asking me to let him explain. “I’m a Jew,” he said, “and although my core identity is still as a Jew, in other ways I’m a happy convert.” Active at every level of parish leadership, he also actively pursues friendship with Jesus. “Still,” he

wrote, “when I listened to the earlier set of tapes, there were times when I cringed to hear echoes of the old ‘teaching of contempt.’ It seemed like you looked underneath the surface of everyone in the gospel stories, showing complex motivations and spiritual struggles—yet your portrayal of Jesus’ opponents and the Pharisees seemed one-dimensional and lacking in sympathy.”

As graciously as this was couched, it was like hearing that I had been caught strangling kittens while walking in my sleep. Me? Engaging in the teaching of contempt?

I set down the letter and went to find the sermons in question. Before I had read two pages, I was staring at a dead cat. In a sermon on the “easy yoke” passage from Matthew 11, I had helped Jesus make his case by nailing the Pharisees as self-righteous prigs. Reducing them to cardboard cutouts of everything I found despicable in religious people, I was not only able to blow them away handily. I was also able to congratulate myself for doing so.

All these years later, it is clear that I did Jesus no favors by lampooning his opponents. His ministry involved engaging real people with real concerns, not defeating cartoon characters. It is even clearer that I maligned observant Jews everywhere by painting those who love Torah with the same old scorn-full brush. While my California correspondent was kind enough to note some progress in my preaching, my penance has involved trying to figure out what I was thinking in 1990 as well as why my thinking has changed.

Fourteen years ago, I believed that the New Testament told me the whole truth about Pharisaic Judaism. Nothing in my church or seminary education led me to believe otherwise. None of the commentaries I used to prepare my sermons challenged the traditional story of Christian origins. I do not remember whether it was Jack Spong or Marcus Borg who first raised serious questions about that story for me, but they led me to Jewish teachers such as Jacob Neusner and Paula Fredriksen (as well as Christian ones such as E. P. Sanders and Mary Boys), who have enriched my reading of the New Testament by helping me recognize the nature of its polemics.

Simply to find those teachers changed the way I preached about Torah, Talmud and Judaism. Then a man in my congregation married a Jewish woman who sometimes came with him to church. When she did, I heard the slurs in familiar passages. I

tasted the razor blades in beloved hymns. Before long, she had changed my sermons even when she was not there. If what I said did not sound like good news to her, I decided, then it was not the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In an essay on Mel Gibson's movie earlier this year, Rabbi Michael Lerner said that if Christians have not confronted anti-Judaism as effectively as they have tackled other "isms," then that is because doing so requires them to question the historical truth of their own scriptures. I believe he is right. Yet even without such questioning, those same scriptures call me to love my neighbor, and in that I find no room for the teaching of contempt.

The question is, who will tell me to XYZ? Who will help me see the contempt that I do not see, especially when I spend my time with people who have been shaped by the same texts that I have? My working answer is to make regular lunch dates with people who see things differently than I do, for it is in their presence that my own vision comes clear: the community in which I practice faith is not the Christian community—nor even the Judeo-Christian community—but the community of all humankind.