

## The Making of a Heretic

TEXT: Joshua 24:14-28

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on August 11, 2024*

One of the things I learned in preparing for this series about heresies and conflicts in the church is that the word “heresy” itself comes from the Greek word *haireomai*, meaning “to choose.” The more I thought about that, the more disturbing it became. At its most basic level, a heretic is merely someone who chooses to believe something different than what is typically taught as truth in a given religion. Heretics aren’t punished for what they do; they’re punished for what they believe. And, for that, people have been exiled, imprisoned, tortured, and killed.

One of the most famous examples is this one, as told by the History Channel’s website about a man who came under the scrutiny of the Spanish Inquisition:

“On June 22, 1633, the Church handed down the following order: “We pronounce, judge, and declare, that you, the said Galileo... have rendered yourself vehemently suspected by this Holy Office of heresy, that is, of having believed and held the doctrine (which is false and contrary to the Holy and Divine Scriptures) that the sun is the center of the world, and that it does not move from east to west, and that the earth does move, and is not the center of the world.”

“Along with the order came the following penalty: “We order that by a public edict the book of Dialogues of Galileo Galilei be prohibited, and We condemn thee to the prison of this Holy Office during Our will and pleasure; and as a salutary penance We enjoin on thee that for the space of three years thou shalt recite once a week the Seven Penitential Psalms.”

“Galileo agreed not to teach the heresy anymore and spent the rest of his life under house arrest.” Do you know when the Vatican finally pardoned Galileo? In 1992! That’s three years after the spacecraft that bears his name was launched to find its way to Jupiter.

While the abuse and execution of heretics rightly commands attention—and both Protestants and Catholics have done it; it’s worth noting that in some times and places, choosing to believe something out of the mainstream was a bit bumpy, but they worked it out.

Those who chose to believe things that were outside the established ideas just started their own religious group, or moved to a more tolerant country if they had to. In some times and places, people have actually enjoyed debating different ideas, and have actively fostered dialogue between religion and science to see what each might have to teach the other. Imagine that.

I titled this sermon “The Making of a Heretic,” because declarations of heresy require specific conditions, apart from someone holding a belief or advancing an idea that a group of others don’t share. That condition necessary for the making of a heretic is having those who disagree with you in a position of power with an authoritarian leadership style. It might be a government or a religious institution, but typically, it’s a combination of both—a religious institution or powerful leader that has gained at least significant power if not total control over a government. It doesn’t even have to be a group. If you have a dictator, you can be punished as a heretic just by believing something that one person doesn’t like.

Back in the year 312 the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. But Constantine didn’t convert after years of careful study and consideration. According to the ancient writer Eusebius, at about 40 years old, Constantine had a dream where he saw a cross in the sky and Jesus promising that the sign of the cross would grant Constantine victory over his enemies. He woke up and issued the Edict of Milan, which decreed the empire would from then on be Christian and, to the relief of many, stopped the Roman persecution of the church.

But when your sole understanding of your religion is a dream promising you power if you adopt it; you have to figure some things out about your faith. Making that difficult for Constantine were the many different factions of Christianity at the time, who all believed different things. How would Constantine know what the official belief of the empire was? And if he didn’t know what the official belief actually was, how could he possibly know who his enemies were?

All emperors, kings, and autocrats must know at all times who their enemies are or they risk losing power, so this was a problem that needed an immediate solution. There was an especially hot disagreement at the time over teaching by a guy named Arius, who we will meet in a few weeks.

So, in 325, Constantine brought together a council of Christian bishops in what is now the Turkish city of Nicaea to come up with something definitive that Christians believed and to sort out the conflict over Arius. That group of bishops produced the Nicene Creed, which, if you're curious, is on p. 880 in the back of the red hymnal.

The first use of the term "heresy" in a political context was in the year 380 in the Edict of Thessalonica, the Greek city where Paul founded a church and to whom he wrote two letters, now in our Bibles as First and Second Thessalonians. The Edict of Thessalonica, issued jointly by the rulers on both the East and the West sides of the Roman empire, made the particular beliefs expressed in the Nicene Creed the official beliefs of the Roman Empire. It not only condemned the choice of other understandings of Christianity; it authorized punishment for any belief that stepped outside the bounds of the Nicene Creed.

Just five years after the Edict of Thessalonica brought heresy into politics,

Priscillian, who had become a bishop in Avila, Spain the year the edict was issued, became the first casualty of that decree. He was executed as a heretic by Roman officials in 385, earning him the dubious honor of being the first Christian heretic to be so dispatched.

And what was Priscillian's heresy? Well, for one thing he encouraged people to meet in homes instead of in church buildings. And, horror of horrors, he let people take the elements they were given in the eucharist at church and consume them outside the sanctuary—even at home. He also encouraged an ascetic lifestyle, to abstain from worldly pleasures to focus on spiritual pursuits. He recognized religious wisdom and authority in apostles, prophets, and teachers, and not just priests and popes.

Unforgivably, Priscillian allowed women to join with men during the time of prayer. He let people meditate on the mountains instead of in a church during Lent. Notably for us as Methodists, he believed people could perfect themselves through spiritual disciplines. We'll visit that heresy again in a couple of weeks with my good friend and heretic, Pelagius, and John Wesley's defense of him.

As for Priscillian, encouraging an inclusive spirituality that could be practiced where no one was watching—at home, up in the mountains; and recognizing authority outside the church's chain of command could not be tolerated, likely because it couldn't be monitored and controlled. The Romans charged the good bishop with sorcery and executed him, just five years after the Edict of Thessalonica gave Rome that authority. Avila lost a good bishop that day.

And it's here I want to pause for a word from this morning's sponsor, Joshua, son of Nun, who took over leadership of the Israelites upon the passing of Moses. Joshua has a book of the Bible named after him, which properly comes right after the book of Exodus, which is all about Moses. Moses passed the mantle of authority to Joshua—a young and charismatic leader—who carried forward the values the Israelites gained in the desert into a new place and a new time. Not that it all went swimmingly—it never does. But in one crucial area, Joshua gets it absolutely right.

If you remember back to Moses getting the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai, in Exodus 19:7-8 we read, "7 So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. 8 The people all answered as one: 'Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.' Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord."

Only when God hears that response, that all the people are in agreement, does the law go into effect. In other words, the people had a choice.

That choice was preceded by a reminder about all God had done for them in liberating them from their bondage in Egypt and getting them safely to that point. While it's true that it would be pretty silly not to choose to stick with the God who had done all of that, the Israelites still had a choice. They willingly bind themselves to God's commandments.

That's one of many reasons that those today trying to force-feed the Ten Commandments onto everyone is so offensive. Not even God did that. The God who liberates is not the God who turns around and enslaves people to

a different kind of law against their will. God is love; and love has to be freely chosen or it's not love, a point I'll come back to when we visit the free will versus pre-destination debates later in this series.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a God of freedom. If you choose to follow that God, you have to check the box saying that you have read and understood the terms and conditions, but you can choose to walk away. Jesus does this, too. When Jesus reaches out to the Rich Young Ruler and invites him to become a disciple, the man refuses the terms and walks away.

Notably, Jesus doesn't run after him and beg him to stay. Jesus doesn't strike him with lightning or have the rest of his disciples hog tie him and drag him into discipleship anyway. The young man had a choice; he said no; and Jesus honored that choice. There is always a choice, both in Judaism and in Christianity. The Israelites had a choice in whether to accept the bounds of the Ten Commandments. They said yes.

And, right before Joshua dies, in today's reading from Joshua 24, that covenant first made at Mt. Sinai is renewed now that the Israelites are in the Promised Land. Just like Moses before him, Joshua recites a long litany of all God has done for them to that point. Also just like with Moses, the people have a choice. They're in a new land. There are other gods worshipped in the region. The God of Moses lets the people choose, and Joshua does not take that choice from them. As we heard a bit ago from Joshua 24,

“<sup>15</sup> Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

The people respond that of course they will serve the Lord, which I'm sure they knew was the expected answer. But Joshua actually presses the case, just as Jesus would later press his disciples to count the cost before signing up for discipleship. In chapter 24, verses 19 and following, Joshua backs up to say, in essence, “Are you sure? Are you really, really sure? You can get out now if you want; but if you go forward, you have to go all in or there will be real consequences.”

The people still insist that's what they want and Joshua sets up a stone as a memorial to their commitment. From there the people go to their tribal territories. They are in kinship groups, which lead themselves in day-to-day matters. When there is an outside threat, someone steps up to unite the tribes to defend themselves, and those periodic, charismatic military leaders became known as Judges. Their stories are in the next book of the Bible, which bears that name.

Think again about the fact that the root of the word “heresy” is simply the Greek word for making a choice. But since the late fourth century, in times and places when the Church has been able to co-opt or directly take command of empires and nations, cities and councils, armies and treasuries, that joint church/state owns not just your body but your mind. You are not free to express any beliefs contrary to whatever brand of Christianity has wrested control without giving up basic civil liberties, up to and including your life.

Whether it was Constantine imposing the Nicene Creed on the Roman Empire, John Calvin imposing his brand of Protestant belief on Geneva and killing Anabaptists, the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay driving out Quakers or even other Puritans with slightly different beliefs; or Hitler imposing Christian Nationalism on Nazi Germany and sending others to the gas chambers; it is the joining of church and state that turns choices into heresies punishable by imprisonment, torture, and death.

God is not only stuffed in a box with the lid sealed up tight, you can be killed for having ideas about God even inside that closed box, let alone trying to discuss the merits of a state-sponsored idea in the public square. And with that, spirituality is strangled, religious diversity is extinguished, and the monoculture of a state religion becomes stale, rote, and cruel. God, who can't get out of the top of the box, leaves it through the bottom and goes underground, working across years, decades, or even centuries to free the people once again.

Heresy, as we think of it today, can't exist in a truly free society. The First Amendment in our constitution forbids the establishment of any religion by the government at any level, which allows everyone to freely practice their faith as long as it doesn't infringe the rights of others. The language of heresy is not the language of freedom.

Starting next week, we'll be diving into some specific beliefs that have been labeled as heresies as well as other ideas that have divided Christians across time. Where I hope this will lead is to greater understanding of our own faith, both personally and collectively, even if we believe different things, which I am certain we do. I want every

person here to look inward and think, “Gee, what do I actually think about that?” And, more importantly, “How did I come to believe what I do?”

Did I just swallow what someone told me at some point in my life, or did I wrestle through the options myself and land here? Did I even know there were options? Did I experience something that caused me to question what I was told Christians believe? Did I experience something that confirmed for me what Christians believe? Do all Christians actually believe it or just Catholic Christians or Methodist Christians or Presbyterian Christians or whatever?

The only thing I feel sure of is that some part of every single belief—whether labeled as orthodox or heretical—is at least partially wrong. It’s just hard to tell which part that is. Call it the “Blind Men and the Elephant” syndrome from the poem I closed with last week. Just don’t call it heresy. And if someone is slinging the heretic label at you, just excuse yourself and walk away. You’re talking to a closed God box, which annoys everyone and helps no one.

My hope is to help you get a glimpse of what was described in a piece in the New York Times in 1930:

“It is very difficult to elucidate this feeling to anyone who does not experience it. The individual feels the vanity of human desires and aims and the nobility and marvelous order which are revealed in nature and in the world of thought. Individual existence strikes him as a sort of prison, and he wants to experience the universe as a single, significant whole. The religious geniuses of all ages have been distinguished by this kind of religious feeling. In my view, it is the most important function of art and science to awaken this feeling and keep it alive in those who are receptive to it.”

The author of those words was Albert Einstein.

May we all be receptive to God and to each other—and to the particular heretics called Gnostics, who we’re going to talk about next week. Amen.