"The Truth of Complicity,"
a sermon given by the Rev. Leaf Seligman
on March 24, 2013

Now it was the day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon. He said to the Jews, "Here is your King!" They cried out, "Away with him! Away with him! Crucify him!" Pilate asked them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but the emperor." Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. (John 19:14-16)

This is the season when Bach's St. John's Passion lifts these words in song. Long before I heard them set to music, I experienced them. In 1967, my friend Rachel introduced me to a girl in her neighborhood by saying, "This is Leaf. She's a Jew." I had no idea why Rachel introduced me that way but I went from wondering why to registering the look on the girl's face, the way her features curdled. "You killed Christ!" she said, the emphasis on you. I remember thinking "No, I didn't. I wasn't even there." The girl turned on her heels and marched off. I tugged Rachel's sleeve and asked the obvious: "You think this means she won't let me jump on her trampoline?"

The second time a child said, "You killed Christ," I had a ready answer: "That's right," I smirked, "I nailed the left hand." The whole thing felt so preposterous. Eight years old, accused of something so distant, so utterly impossible. After a boy at the private day school I attended laughed and called me a Jew when I bent down to pick up a penny, my mother told me of her arrival in Nashville in 1946—her shock at seeing signs posted at a private park that said "No Jews or Dogs Allowed." She explained anti-Semitism as two thousand years of hatred built on erroneous beliefs, careful to do it in such a way that didn't alienate me from the Christians who populated my world.

At sixteen or so, I heard a line on a quirky TV show called, "Mary Hartman" where an unsophisticated character blurts out, "It was your people that killed our Lord." From then on, I borrowed the line, maintaining the cadence and intonation. As if to prevent anyone from accusing me ever again, I would facetiously blurt, "I know, it was my people killed your Lord." I made it sound as ridiculous as it felt, but even so, the Gospel of John continued to haunt me.

Even after taking a New Testament course in divinity school where the world-renowned professor painstakingly pointed out the historical inaccuracy of Jewish culpability for the death of Jesus; even after I came to see the Gospel of John as a kind of drama designed to agitate and propagandize during times of repression, I still heard myself saying during Clinical Pastoral Education, "It was my people killed your Lord." And at the end of CPE, my colleagues lovingly told me to knock it off. Finally, I had to consider why, after so many years, I still resorted to saying that.

As terrifying as the text of John has been—expressed in the Christian anti-Semitism I experienced in childhood—I return to the Gospel of John now, deliberately, to face an even

deeper terror: the likelihood that there were some Jews in that crowd who, precisely because they lacked power, cried, “Crucify him.”

I now face the Christkiller of my own imagining, not that of some eight-year-old with a trampoline. What leads me to suggest—as I fly in the face of historical criticism—that any Jew called for the death of Jesus? And why must I search for myself there?

To answer that, I return to my mother, who told me a long time ago the worst anti-Semitism she encountered was displayed by Jews. Internalized oppression is well documented, and in my experience, it arises from fear. Disempowered people are rightfully afraid.

At age twenty, waiting for my mother to park the car as clusters of Jews gathered to attend a concert of Klezmer music, I hoped no one from work would see me. It’s a feeling I experienced many times: not wanting to be identified as one of “them”—loud, pushy Jews from New York or Florida, who tip too little and demand too much. Jews with shelves full of tchotzkes, studious rabbis and Lucite dishes that say “Have a Nosh.”

Ten years later, I am at a panel on race and class at a women’s playwriting conference. A Jewish woman rises to ask a question, or more accurately, make a comment: one of those impassioned entreaties to consider the plight of Jews. With every fiber of my being I want to disappear or make her sit down and shut up. Don’t you see, I am thinking, or fuming, this is exactly why people hate us. We are always grabbing the airspace and making it about us. Oy.

A couple of years ago, I attend a presentation by a young Jewish American woman whose experience in Israel and Palestine compelled her to devote her life to speaking out against Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza. The audience seems sympathetic or at least willing to hear her out—except for the man pacing in the back of the room waiting to jump in, to yell, to cause a scene. To speak his truth. No, I think, not now. Save it for later. Please don’t make a scene. And then it hits me: who was Jesus but a scene-making sometimes pushy Jew who spoke his truth regardless of who he angered?

It’s easy for me to gravitate toward his attributed sensibilities: generous, conciliatory, an advocate for the marginalized. Like Jesus, I, too, am drawn to marginalized folk. For decades, I have taught and volunteered in prisons spending time with folks serving time for sex crimes, robbery, murder. Since childhood, I have aligned with the downtrodden, the scorned, the misunderstood. As long as they weren’t loud, attention-drawing types with a Long Island accent, as long as they weren’t the Jewish girls of my youth with sculpted nails and big hair who cared nothing for radical politics and talked about marrying doctors. As long as they weren’t urban articulate Jewish feminists trying to make a point or twitching Jewish men convinced the State of Israel is under attack.

And if somehow I were surrounded by an angry mob, ready to send a noisy Jewish agitator to his death, could I conceive of the possibility that I might see the Roman equivalent of a billy club and yell in fear, and perhaps a bit of contempt, “Crucify him”? Yes.

In the Spanish film, LaMariposa, a young boy develops a great fondness for his teacher, a Communist sympathizer, like the boy’s father, under Franco’s rise to power. At the end of the film, when the teacher and several others are arrested and dragged into the street, the boy’s mother fears for her family’s safety and instructs her son to yell “Reds” as the handcuffed men file by. The

boy, emulating the adults around him, picks up a rock and hurls it at his beloved teacher. In that moment when I both hate the mother and identify, I recognize the Christkiller in me.

So what must I take from the terrifying text of John? I must take heed. I must work for justice and audibly oppose oppression, even when it entails someone not liking me. Someone thinking I'm too much or too loud. And equally as frightening, I must co-exist and even recognize my kinship with those who advocate for what they consider just even if I want them to shut the hell up or disappear.

In 1993 I attended a large rally in Washington for gay rights and saw bare-chested women congregating on a D.C. street corner and S&M advocates marching in studded collars and leather thongs, I cringed. I wanted all the freaky way-too-out-there queers to go home and stop scaring the nice Midwesterners who had unwittingly brought their kids to see the nation's capitol on the wrong weekend.

Of course I felt totally self-righteous in my anger and disgust at Fred Phelps and his followers—who were in Washington at that rally in 1993 with their "God Hates Fags" signs just as they are at military funerals today. I wracked my brain to understand how anyone could conflate God with hate. They strike me as dangerous not just wrong. And then I think again of Jesus (who also appeared dangerous to his detractors)—and I am forced to ask what can the seeming meanness and malice of Fred Phelps teach me?

That I am scared of what appears to undermine and therefore threaten me. That I am quick to dismiss Fred Phelps as a homophobic fundamentalist whack-job, but the moment I do, I diminish his humanity as quickly as he diminishes mine. Fred Phelps summons me to find the part of myself who bolts the door when I see the studded-collar leather-thonged men and my bare-breast-waving sisters coming.

The people at that rally I wished to distance myself from make me look run of the mill with my classy ties and Doc Marten shoes. I grew up convinced I was a boy in an erroneously female body and my parents indulged that. They let me wear boys' clothes and live in my own gender-reconstructed world. They may not have welcomed my queerness but they embraced me and were proud of me and never distanced themselves from a daughter who first longed to be their son and then went braless with unshaven legs for years (not an attractive look on either count).

To be honest, I would not cozy up to my strident twenty-year-old self. But I would go back and cradle her the day a fifteen-year-old student in remedial reading class where I assisted literally leapt across the room, squealing in horror after she asked me "Are you gay?"

I thought hard how to answer the girl, knowing the truth would elicit that kind of response. Living our truths demands courage no matter who we are. Nowadays, being a tie-wearing female Jewish UU minister probably wouldn't cause any of our congregations to bolt the door; but if I were to announce that deep in my heart I harbor an inner tent-revivalist who longs to bring Pentecostal fervor to liberal religious theology some folks might jerk away the welcome mat.

In order to diminish the Christkiller in me, I must embody Jesus. I, a Jew, must for a moment, reach across the Seder table and take communion. I must look Jesus in the eye and say, "Yes, brother, I will embody you. I will take the blood and flesh of your being as a symbol of your work, your willingness to place yourself in peril, to stand with the wrongly accused and the

guilty, with the tax collectors and the sinners, with the disenfranchised, the diseased and the poor. I will not scorn the silent or noisy. Instead I will listen to them both."

The message that rings across the ages from the Gospel of John still pains me, but it pains me differently now. It summons me, perhaps all of us, to face the Christkiller in the mirror—the one who is afraid to call on the courage of Jesus, or Moses, or Miriam, and the legions of queer and transgender people who have spoken in decibels and tones that disquiet and unnerve—speaking truths that overturn the status quo, that echo Amos and resound in Martin Luther King. The message I hear today summons me to kinship with the very ones I am loath to claim. Daily, may we resist the understandable temptation to turn against those who seek to free us from the confines of oppression, even when we are frightened to leave the familiarity of the cell. Amen.