

I was at the store yesterday, and went down the book aisle looking at the books on sale, as I usually do. Even if I don't particularly need a book, if it is marked down, there's a 50/50 chance I'll buy it. At the other end, a man stopped and picked up a volume, and said to the woman with him, "Here's something you ought to read." And she answered, "I don't need no book!" Now, I didn't know her situation, but it seemed to me, a book couldn't hurt. A couple of minutes later I made it down to that end of the shelves, and saw the large yellow paperback he had held up for her: *Stress Relief for Dummies*. Now, I don't know which part of the title offended her, but I have always thought that books were good things, whether for stress relief or amusement- or grammar, because they can open up other worlds and different ideas for the reader. Even if it is something from the Bible- different from all the other books of the Bible, like this little book at the very back pages of the New Testament.

This is a first for me, and it may be for you as well, a first sermon based upon a text from Jude. It is the 24<sup>th</sup> largest book in the New Testament, only 25 verses long, and contains in those few lines of text, some interesting references from the apocryphal literature, like the quote from the Book of Enoch in our

passage, and references to the legends that grew up around biblical figures, such as Moses or Cain in verses 9 and 11. Scholars think it is one of the two or three latest works written in the New Testament canon, and almost wasn't accepted by the church fathers as inspired scripture. It was called "doubtful" or "disputed" by some, and it does have a different tone in its writing than the letters of Paul, for instance. Jude is one of the "catholic" letters- there are seven of them, the short works at the end of the New Testament: James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, 3, John, and Jude; the literal meaning of catholic here, not Roman Catholic but universality, with the idea that the letter is for the church everywhere, since it is not addressed to one community of believers, or to one individual.

Jude, in the greeting of verses 1 and 2, claims to be the brother of James, which would make him also the brother of Jesus, so it is strange that he does not use that as the authority behind his writing. And if this letter is as late as modern scholarship generally thinks, then Jude would have been perhaps 80 or 90 years old at its composition. The author states his desire for his readers to be faithful, to "contend for the faith," verse 3, and not live ungodly lives, not live like those heretics who pervert the grace of God, verse 4, or reject authority, verse 8. But he doesn't specify which brand of heresy, doesn't explain their false doctrine, or the

manner of their ungodliness. There are many questions arising from these 25 short verses.

There are things to like and dislike about Jude. Jude is a churchman. If the author is really Jesus' brother, why he doesn't use his kinship with the Savior of the world as the basis of his authority? Instead he uses his relation to James, the head of the Jerusalem church, the biggest and most influential church. Jude's emphasis is upon the church; he sees himself as part of the universal church and he wants to keep church doctrine pure. And of course, that is a good thing. But what I dislike about Jude is that he has almost nothing to tell us about relationships within church, about the community at worship together, and serving and loving one another. Very little theology to support his doctrine.

Sometimes there is a big difference between keeping doctrine pure at all costs, and loving and helping people. A troubling case has come up in Brazil where a nine-year-old girl was raped and impregnated, allegedly by her stepfather. Her mother took her to the doctor who examined her and terminated the pregnancy. Now when the bishop down there learned about the abortion, he immediately excommunicated the mother, the doctor, and some of his medical staff. The facts of the case he felt were not extraordinary enough to modify the

church's stance on abortion. Then the Vatican entered into the furor that surrounded this incident, and issued a statement saying that the bishop had acted properly, that abortion was a greater sin than rape, greater, I guess, than even the rape of a nine-year-old girl. Remember, excommunication doesn't mean simply that one may not attend church services and no longer partake of Holy Communion, but that he or she is cut off from the fellowship of the church completely- and cut off from the entire community; and, as a statement of Roman Catholic doctrine, it cuts that person off from salvation. So, for the sake of the rules of the church, they have decided to condemn these people to hell. Doctrine over mercy and compassion. That doesn't sound like the Jesus of the gospels to me, but it does sound like some churches I am familiar with; sounds more like the Spanish Inquisition or the Salem Witch Trials, or countless other occasions when people were put down or condemned or killed for mistakes they had made, or simply for being different, or even for being victims. And it sounds a little like Jude, who talks about "The Faith," the authority of the apostles' teaching- "once for all delivered" to the church, complete and unchangeable.

As I said, it is important to maintain the truth about our Lord Jesus, so "contending for the faith" is a duty for us all. But most important of all is that we

do not see “the faith” just as an institution to be defended no matter what, but rather that we understand faith as trust in the Lord who loves us, trust because of that love, and gratitude for that love; and our commitment therefore, to sharing that love. So, Jude, with all its strangeness, gets it right in our passage, verses 20 and 21, when he tells his readers to build themselves up in the faith- and the meaning of that building up is creating a household of faith where believers are joined together in common purpose and hope. And Jude defines that building up in the church’s relationship to God. As a community of faith: pray in the Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me see if I can make this connection to something very contemporary. In every one of the seven Harry Potter books we are made to understand how important love is; we are told that Harry was saved from Voldemort’s death curse by his mother’s sacrifice. Over and over we read that Harry’s mother’s love protected him, and that Harry’s ability to love kept him from ever being tempted by dark magic. So in what we may have first thought a dozen years ago when the first book was released, what we may have thought was a fun romp through a magical make-believe land, since then we have come to realize that the author’s

intent was to show the mighty power of love: greater than the most powerful curse, greater than the seemingly unbreakable rules of magic.

The same kind of love that is mightier than all the rules and dogma of religion, love that sacrifices for the beloved. Rules are good, we need them, but our Lord did not die for the sake of rules; but he gave himself up for us, because of his love of each of us, and saved us from the death curse of hatred and pride and evil. So that, now, we come together to share that love, and to speak the good news of that love; to rejoice that love has come to us, and has claimed us as its own, and lifts us up into union with God and with one another.