

Light One Candle... and Another...

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Reading

poem based on speeches by Rev. Martin Niemoller (1892-1984)

First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a communist.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

Sermon

“Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

Martin Niemoller expressed the sentiments of this morning’s reading in various ways in speeches over the years; and he knew what he was talking about.

A Lutheran pastor in Germany as Hitler rose to power, Niemoller was (as Wikipedia describes him) at first a supporter of Hitler and what seemed to some at the time to be more or less ordinary conservative policies; but then he came to oppose Hitler’s policies in relation to the church. Even so, during those same years Niemoller made remarks consistent with the general anti-Semitism of that era in Germany.

Well, he was imprisoned from 1938-1945 in two concentration camps, including Dachau, for his views about the Nazi regime, and he narrowly escaped execution.

So he most certainly was speaking from experience with the words we heard earlier:

...they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

After the war and his release, as these words of his make clear, he understood.

It is an old story after all. Too easy to ignore or deny the persecution or oppression of some group of people to which one does not belong... which can be a long list. For a healthy comfortable white, straight American male these days, the list could include: African Americans, women, gays, immigrants, differently abled folks, people of a different faith....

But what does the reality of our deeply interwoven interdependence mean if it doesn't mean that our own fate *is* tied intimately to the fate of others of whatever color their skin, background, belief, and so on.

Which is why the interfaith vigils and services, include the service here in Hull, following the murders at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh were so important, indeed essential to our democracy and to the values that are at the root of all faiths, certainly our own Unitarian Universalism.

Well, needless to say, many groups find themselves oppressed or discriminated against. But with the eighth night of Hanukkah this evening, it is anti-Semitism I'll focus on this morning.

I grew up on Long Island in a community with a large Jewish population. In our own neighborhood our friends the Lubars lived next door, the Lelands down the street, and one of my best friends, Ricky Weinstein, lived around the corner – just a few of our many Jewish neighbors. So, with this as our neighborhood context, when at whatever age I first became aware of something called anti-Semitism I could not understand it. Why would anyone hate people who included these wonderful neighbors and friends?

But of course people did.

I learned this forcefully when Ricky Weinstein showed me, in a book his family had, photographs of the concentration camps, emaciated figures, corpses.

Far more subtly I remember well one of my elementary school classmates, whose name I can't recall, announcing to our music teacher that his parents had told him he didn't have to be one of Santa's reindeer in our Christmas play... because he was Jewish. I am to this day in awe of his ten-year-old courage.

And though performing a Christmas play in a public school, common at the time, was not overtly anti-Semitic, it surely did highlight one of the many ways that a largely Christian culture overshadowed and could make life awkward and worse for those of different faiths, most certainly including those of the Jewish faith.

Yet if to be an American means anything, it should mean that each person and each group of people have the right to be different from others, most assuredly including different from the majority – without being made to feel marginalized.

Indeed, the former rabbi of Congregation Sha'aray Shalom here in Hingham, Steve Karol, used to describe Hanukkah itself as the festival that honors and lifts up exactly this, the right to be different.

It sounds so easy. Why should anyone protest this right to be different? Why, to be more specific, should anyone hate or persecute Jews?

Well, that's a long story.

But a critically important one. I can hardly tell the whole of it – James Carroll, in his magisterial book *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews*, tells much of it, and even that took him over six hundred pages.

Well, we don't need to know everything about the history and roots of anti-Semitism, but we would do well to know this much, that it begins not with Jesus – himself a Jew after all – but with the gospel accounts of his life and in particular of his arrest and crucifixion.

Matthew's gospel, for example, has the crowd, identified as Jews, call out for the execution of Jesus and then, in Matthew's words:

And all the people answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"

John's gospel is even more explicit:

Pilate said to them (the chief priests and the officers), "Take him yourself and crucify him, for I find no crime in him."

The Jews answered him, "We have a law, and by that law he ought to die, because he has made himself the Son of God...."

He said to the Jews, "Here is your king!"

They cried out, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him."

And earlier in John's gospel, John has Jesus himself say this to "the Jews":

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning.

Sadly, I could go on. Perhaps needless to say, and of course tragically, these and other passages have been used over the centuries to justify the marginalization and persecution of the Jewish people, eventually including the unfathomable catastrophe of the Holocaust.

The churches were complicit in all this, not always, not all the time, and sometimes ambiguously so, but without question complicit nevertheless.

The theological challenge was and is this: How are Christians meant to understand the continued existence of Jews, when, at least in the orthodox understanding, Jesus was the Messiah, fulfilling the prophecies in what Christians call the Old Testament, thereby superceding the religion of his own birth?

At best this is just an interesting theological conundrum. At worst, taken with the gospel passages I've just cited and others, it is a justification for persecution and even murder – whether Hitler's "final solution" or the gunman at the Tree of Life congregation.

Now, James Carroll, a former priest, is still a practicing and faithful Catholic. And in *Constantine's Sword*, he struggles mightily with the weight of this history – not only these gospel justifications for the hatred of Jews, but the entire history of the church, from the earliest years to Constantine to the Crusades to the Holocaust and to our own time.

In this struggle, one of his key points has to do with the way we have most often misread the gospel accounts. To oversimplify, Carroll points out that there was no such thing as a unified "Jewish" community at the time of Jesus, and certainly nothing like Judaism as we know it today. Rather, there were many competing factions among the people called "Jews" – Pharisees, Saducees, Essenes, and others. And they were all

under the iron-fisted yoke of the Romans. And the Romans took advantage of these internecine conflicts as part of their strategy to maintain their control. For it was, after all, the Romans who crucified Jesus – from their perspective just another troublemaker during a period of many troublemakers and incipient rebellions that had to be put down, in their view, at any cost. And the Romans were quite content to see others take the blame for the crucifixion, themselves seeming to remain somewhat above the fray.

Further, we must remember that all four of the gospel accounts were composed well after Jesus' death, in the case of John it might have been as much as seventy years later; and significantly all these accounts were composed after the destruction of the Temple and the razing of Jerusalem at the hand of the Romans, and each of the gospel writers wove the stories, including the story of Jesus' crucifixion in ways that matched their own purposes – and not necessarily the facts of the matter.

All of which is too much to explore further today. Carroll's point, though, and mine, is that the centuries-long libel against the Jewish people, that the Jews killed the Savior – is to a significant extent if not entirely based on fictionalized accounts which for largely political reasons took on religiously canonical status.

Carroll affirms, and I expect we would all agree, that we need to begin telling the story in a different way.

I would further affirm that we need to understand religion in a different way from the overly-literalized ways it is too often and often destructively expressed. Putting not beliefs and creeds, but heart-values first – which is, so far as I can tell, what the actual person Jesus did.

It is also what the people of Billings, Montana did exactly twenty-five years ago this season. Perhaps some of you remember the story as it was later put into the form of a children's book titled *Christmas Menorahs*. Here is a much too brief summary, based on an article by the author of that book, Janice Cohn.

In the early 1990s there had been a growing presence of skinhead and racist groups in Billings; there were mailings of hate literature directed against blacks, Jews, and other minorities. It culminated in December of 1993 with the desecration of graves at a Jewish cemetery, vandalizing of several homes displaying menorahs, and most shocking with a rock thrown through a window of one of those homes into the bedroom of a child.

To compress the story: The police chief and Christian religious leaders spoke out against all this, non-Jewish families began displaying menorahs in their windows, and the local newspaper printed a large picture of a menorah which they encouraged non-Jewish residents to display – thousands did just that. And when the local synagogue celebrated a service during Hanukkah, dozens and dozens of Christians attended.

The hate didn't end all at once, but it dissipated. And I expect that the people of Billings enjoyed a stronger sense of community in the months and years to follow, transcending some of the differences that too often divide us.

The people of Billings didn't need to know the history of anti-Semitism and didn't need to be sophisticated theologians in order to respond as they did. All they

needed to do, which they did do, was to respond from the heart of their traditions which is the heart of all genuinely spiritual religious traditions, rooted in understanding, compassion, kindness, and love.

The people of Billings knew their neighbors, they knew what sort of community they wanted to be, and they certainly knew that rocks through windows, hate mail, and anti-Semitic graffiti did not reflect that community.

That's all. And maybe that's everything.

You see, the people of Billings may or may not have been familiar with the words of Martin Niemoller, but they certainly had his message inscribed in their hearts.

As we all must.

How then to respond to anti-Semitism?

Yes, it might help to know something of the history and the roots of this hateful legacy. But we don't need to know any of that in order... well, to respond! Not to be silent as if anti-Semitism has nothing to do with us if we are not Jewish... because it has everything to do with us, just as persecution or discrimination or threats against Muslims, immigrants, gays, trans, and on it goes has everything to do with us.

In our own home, we light a menorah in this season, not because we are Jewish or pretend to be, but to be part of our daughter-in-law and son and grandson's lives and also to be part of the larger interfaith community and community of life.

We light one candle... and then another... to represent a faith that transcends all faiths, a faith rooted in values shared across traditions, faith that the lights of freedom and dignity and understanding and love will not go out, but will burn the brighter as long as together we tend the flames.

So may it be.