

# Where Charity and Love Prevail

Romans 14:13-22a

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First Central Congregational UCC

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Our current church is the heir of four different congregations; one of those was St. John's Evangelical Church, which was formed in south Omaha in 1895 by a group of German immigrants. One of the more intriguing passages in our church history books is about St. John's:

During World War I, the church was called "The Kaiser's Church" . . . . Although individuals of the congregation were not subjected to harm, one of the pastors had to kiss the American flag or suffer a beating.

I am unable to locate any further information on this episode, though you can discover general information about the anti-German sentiments in Omaha during World War I. An article in last year's *Omaha World-Herald* said, "While fighting to make the world safe for democracy, Nebraskans nearly lost it at home."

In Omaha Germans were a majority of the population at the time, but they were still discriminated against. Even after the war, laws were passed to enforce English-only against the Germans. St. John's bravely continued to hold worship in the German language until 1935.

I have thought often in recent months of this episode from our history as the rhetoric and violence against immigrants and refugees has increased.

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, following the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, thousands of Germans immigrated to the Midwest. The more traditional among them formed the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod while the more liberal created the Evangelical Synod of North America. The UCC's short history book describes these immigrants as "free-thinking rationalists, who placed their hope in science, education, and culture." Our St. John's Evangelical Church was part of this Evangelical Synod of North America.

This last week was historically significant for these liberal Evangelicals. Not only was it the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, it was also the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Prussian Union. On Reformation Day 1817 King Frederick William III united the Lutheran and Reformed churches in his dominion, bringing together this historic division in Protestant Christianity. Our liberal Evangelical predecessors were part of this historic, ecumenical movement.

When the Reformation broke apart the European church, for the first time a great diversity of religious belief and practice began to coexist. This, of course, caused tension and

ultimately violence, as war and persecution resulted. But this experience with diversity ultimately changed religious faith.

Diarmaid MacCulloch, in his magisterial history of the Reformation, writes that “It is possible to argue that the most significant contribution of the two Reformation centuries to Christianity was the theory and practice of toleration, although it would also be possible to argue that the contribution was inadvertent and reluctant.”

We have tried to be honest in our commemoration of this historic event. While honoring the high points, we have not neglected the dark side. The most troubling aspect of Martin Luther’s own life was his rabid anti-Semitism, expressed in writing near the end of his life. Earlier this year Fred Nielsen borrowed this volume from the collected writings of Luther, which Fred had donated to this church from his own father’s pastoral library. After reading Luther’s work against the Jews, Fred sent me a message, “Not good, not good at all. We knew that already, of course, but to actually read it.”

MacCulloch stated simply, “Luther’s writing of 1543 is a blueprint for the Nazis’ *Kristallnacht* of 1938.”

Fortunately Luther’s anti-Semitism did not go unchallenged even in his lifetime. Andreas Osiander, the Protestant pastor in Nuremberg, wrote against anti-Semitism. And the major Lutheran bodies have since faced this despicable part of their heritage, confessed their sin, and sought reconciliation.

Through a long and troubled history, we have learned toleration, pluralism, and inclusion. We have even come to understand that more is expected of us than mere tolerance; hospitality toward others is an expression of God’s love.

Of course that’s what Paul was preaching at the birth of the church. In Romans he wrote that we should not pass judgment on one another but should “pursue what makes for peace, and for mutual upbuilding.”

Fortunately, we don’t have to earn God’s grace. For if we had to earn it, then our biases, our racism, and our exclusion of others would likely get in the way of our salvation. Instead, God’s grace is more powerful than our sin. Sin and death and racism were defeated when Jesus Christ was raised from the dead and ushered in a new humanity in a new creation.

Yet, the powers-that-be continue to challenge the way of God in this world. They continue to sow darkness, doubt, and injury. They divide, exclude, and violently oppress. The Risen One stands to rebuke them. This is not the way of God. It is the way of sin. It is the path to hell.

We will not be thwarted by their failed philosophies and false doctrines, because we share in the power of the Risen One. We too have been raised with Christ.

Let us make it our habit then to

include the outcast

liberate the oppressed

seek justice for the poor

heal the suffering

give of ourselves with humility

be compassionate toward all in a

community based upon forgiveness and reconciliation

and be the instruments of God's peace in a world of violence.

That's the Good News. Thanks be to God.