

November 4, 2018
All Saints' Sunday, Year B, RCL
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 25:6-9
Psalm 24
Revelation 21:1-6a
John: 11:32-44

At the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., the permanent exhibition space is not organized like a typical museum. You can't really choose a section and just go *there*. Instead, you take an elevator to the third floor, and then you progress back down along a route that depicts a roughly chronological history of the Holocaust. It's laid out a little like an Ikea store: once you start, you're almost forced to experience the entire thing.

One unavoidable object is a boxcar that was used to transport Jews to concentration camps. This large red wooden container sits with its wheels resting on a length of gray steel track. The route through the museum exhibitions goes right through that boxcar: it passes through the open sliding door on one side, into the bare interior, and out the door on the other side. Shortly before I reached that boxcar, I looked up, noticed it up ahead, and realized that I was being asked to go inside. That took me up short, and immediately I began to feel anxious. Though hesitant, I approached the ramp leading into the empty car, slowly entered, and then stood there for quite some time—not moving, just breathing and listening. There happened to be a lull in the crowd, so I was in the boxcar by myself. What I most noticed was that, while I was quite alone, I did not *feel* alone. I felt the weight of countless others.

Last Sunday evening, Jakki and I went to the Jewish Community Center in Woodbridge for the vigil in remembrance of those killed at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. We were late, stuck in the long line of cars turning onto the property. By the time we got into the building, the auditorium was even out of standing room. Staffers scurried to set up a speaker in the hallway outside, so that those of us in the overflow could hear what was being said inside.

I'm sure the words were eloquent, but I remember none of them. What I do remember is this: quite a number of people noticed our clergy collars and came over to us to thank us for being there. Every time it happened, I had to stop myself from bursting into tears. It was such a sad event, and their expressions of gratitude made it more so. I have since pondered why that would be. I expect it's because those repeated exchanges were like fine threads of connection, pulling me out of the emotional distance I might have maintained and into shared human relationship.

Coincidentally, arriving in my mailbox last weekend was the November issue of *Smithsonian* magazine. The cover story is this: “The New Anne Frank: The Long-Hidden Diary of a Young Polish Woman’s Last Days.” It included several related articles about first-person Jewish accounts of the Holocaust. Reading them only increased the mantra that began in my head last Saturday afternoon: *I don’t understand*. I don’t understand why one human being would kill another human being just for being Jewish. I don’t understand how a heart can contain that much hatred.

Right now, around the world, anti-Semitism is again rearing its ugly head. Like an antibiotic-resistant infection, it won’t quite go away—not even here in the United States, where in 1776 our nation’s founders boldly proclaimed that “all men are created equal.”¹ Somewhat illogically, those founders were conflicted about who deserved to inhabit the container labeled “men.” We as a nation remain conflicted, and white Christian nationalism has found a fresh foothold. Never mind the obvious: Jesus was not an American; he wasn’t white; and he wasn’t even a Christian.

In Nazi Germany, the haters found one another, and together they stoked the fires of fear and discontent. Eventually they accumulated enough power to engineer, construct, and operate a massive genocide machine. Only a relatively few active monsters were necessary to execute all that death. But we need to remember this: their “success” depended on the multitudes of regular people who participated simply by turning their heads and looking away.

That is an uncomfortable truth, at least for me. If I imagine myself in that time and place, I don’t see myself having much in common with the monsters. Instead I worry about my capacity to be one of those regular people who looked away. I suspect it wouldn’t take much—just a dollop of prejudice, just a spoonful of insecurity, just a sliver of fear—that’s all it would take to let myself say it’s okay to deny the full humanity of Jews, and if not Jews, then black people, then immigrants, then homeless people, then disabled people, then drug addicts, then poor people, then less educated people. And that makes wonder who I sacrifice *every day* by turning my head.

This is not what I’d expected to be preaching about today. After all, there is a lot going on in our common life, much of it festive. Yesterday Bishop Ian Douglas was here for a service during which he confirmed six parishioners and formally received one into the Episcopal Church. Today is All Saints’ Sunday, the day we commemorate and celebrate the Communion of Saints—the vast network of holy people past, present, and future. In a few minutes we will baptize Lauren, Cayla, and Julian.

In addition, last weekend saw the annual convention of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut. During his address, +Ian talked about how he understands the work of the Episcopal Church in Connecticut at this time. He frequently describes our socio-cultural context as being “post-Christendom.” That’s to say that Christianity has lost the clout it used to enjoy. I suppose it would be nice for our churches to again be wealthy with bodies and dollars. But I’m holding out hope that the fall of Christendom is good for our nation, and good for our churches. In the best-case scenario, it’s a giant example of Lazarus emerging from the tomb and being unbound. We’ve just re-awakened; now we get to re-imagine how to re-engage with the world.

I don't know exactly what that looks like. No one does, and that can feel pretty daunting. But I feel certain that, as we learn to encounter others exactly where they are, developing new relationships of mutual exchange, we will also grow into being ever more authentically Christian. It helps to remember that we're not in this alone. And one way we do that is to claim our relationship to all God's holy people over all time. During the prayers, we will name some who are special to us; but remember, they are representatives of the multitudes of saints among whom we mingle. The role of those saints is not one of restraint, not of holding us back, but rather of encouragement—encouragement to rise to the challenges that are uniquely ours to face, and to set the stage for those who will follow.

Today, to help me remember some particular saints, I'm wearing a lapel pin that I purchased at the Holocaust Museum. It has a red triangle on it; in Nazi concentration camps red triangles were used to identify political prisoners and Christian clergy. During the Holocaust, some Christian clergy took actions that cost them their lives. I can only pray that I will do the right thing if facing similar circumstances. Of course, it's not just hypothetical. Practically every day, I am, and you are, is faced with similar decisions, though on a much smaller scale. Therefore I also pray that I *am* doing the right thing.

Before I visited the Holocaust Museum, I'd heard about its exhibit of shoes—shoes stripped from people being herded toward death at concentration camps. It's impossible to anticipate just how powerful those shoes are when seen in person—you simply have to be there. You have to be there to see not just a few shoes, but a room full of shoes, shoes by the thousands and thousands. Gripped by the power of all those shoes but overwhelmed by the sheer numbers, I began to wonder about the owner of one particular shoe. The shoe I noticed was a woman's shoe, black, aged leather, lace-up, with a low heel. As I looked at it, I wondered about the person whose foot had shaped the leather just so, and whose habits had left that precise pattern of wear.

Of course there was no resolution to my wondering. And yet the simple act of wondering lifted me and the shoe's wearer into a sort of communion. I left the Holocaust Museum feeling emotionally drained, but also surprisingly hopeful. I expect that the hope arose from the sense of relationship that results when we *turn toward* instead of *turn away*, from the power that arises when our stories are joined one to another, linking us together into one human family. This is what opens the kingdom of God's fullness in our hearts, which then flutter toward that fullness for the entire world.

Notes

¹ From the second paragraph of the United States Declaration of Independence.