

The Narrow Gate

April 29, 2007

Fourth Sunday of Eastertide

Matthew 7:13-14

Rev. K Karpen

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“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction and there are many who take it. But the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life and there are few who take it.”

Today I want to talk with you about that narrow gate, the gate that leads to a hard road.

I’ve been thinking a lot about that saying of Jesus as I think about the church through the years.

The day after Easter I left for a little more than a week in Berlin. A small group from the West Side had been invited to spend the week learning about the Confessing Church during the days of the Third Reich. The Confessing Church was the name given to that part of the German protestant church that refused to go along with Hitler and the Nazi program.

I should point out that the Confessing Church was, at best, a faithful remnant. From the start, the majority of the church was content to go through the wide gate, the easy road. The majority of the church was delighted to be swept along in a tide of nationalism and triumphalism, a combination that too often appeals to Christians, in any age, in any country—including our own.

Hitler had plans for the church, he had uses for the church. He saw the church as a useful motivator of the German people. He saw Christian rhetoric as potentially helpful to the cause of National Socialism. He saw the tradition of Christian anti-Judaism as adaptable to his program of making the Jews of Europe the scapegoats of German woes.

But not everyone liked the plan.

We were hosted for the week by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Berlin-based German chapter of the international peace organization. For the week we lived in the former parsonage of Pastor Martin Niemüller.

Niemüller was a conservative German Protestant minister who had been a decorated U-boat captain in World War I. Before Hitler came to power, he voted Nationalist, like many Germans frustrated with the outcome of the Great War. But like some other pastors in the early thirties, he did not like the plans that Hitler had for the church, and he couldn't keep those feelings to himself. He spoke of his disdain for the plans personally to Hitler in a meeting of the leaders of the German Church—and Hitler never forgot and never forgave him for it.

Still, Niemüller never thought that he did enough. After the war he penned the famous lines about the failure of faithful people to act forcefully:

First they came for the Communists and I did not speak out --
because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the Socialists and I did not speak out --
because I was not a Socialist.

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 out for me.

After the disastrous meeting with Hitler Niemüller was placed under observation. Most of the parsonage was bugged, along with the telephones. But there was a little breakfast nook, where I'd drink my tea in the morning. That nook was too far away from the kitchen microphone to pick up the sound of voices, and in that spot one day in 1934 the idea of what became the Confessing Church, a church within a church, was born.

At first, the Confessing Church was not so small—maybe a third of the Protestant clergy signed on, as many as 7000. There was a strong feeling of distaste for the idea adopted by the mainstream of the church that pastors in the church who had some Jewish ancestry would be barred from ministry.

But with time opposing the Nazi agenda became more and more risky, more and more costly. Opposing the mainstream church was said to be unpatriotic, un-German. A lot of the clergy went along with the flow of the mainstream. Pastor Niemüller, after some tactless, frustrated comments spoken over his bugged phone, went to prison.

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The day he was released from prison, Niemüller was arrested by the Gestapo. He was sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp, the first camp built by the Nazis. He was kept there and at Dachau until the end of the war, as a personal prisoner of the Führer.

On Yom Hashoah, Monday, April 16th, the group of us staying in Niemüller’s house decided to take a trip to Dachau and pay tribute to his narrow gate, his hard road, as well as to the many Jews and political prisoners who ended their lives there. But when we called, we found that the camp and the museum there is closed on Mondays. That struck me as a little strange—I never thought about what day of the week a concentration camp would close. But we went the next day instead.

There were 5 of us, 3 Americans and 2 Germans. We took the train to the stop nearest the camp, and began to ask for directions. The police, the bus people, the folks on the street; no one could tell us where it was or how to get there. This despite the fact that the camp was half the size of Central Park and as close to the train station as from here to Columbus Circle. So we walked and found our way.

The camp itself was preserved and partly restored, in the best post-war tradition of coming to terms with a difficult history. Sure enough, there was the gate at the entrance, proclaiming *Arbeit macht frei*—“Work will make you free” words later made

famous on the gate to Auschwitz. And, sure enough, the gate to the camp was narrow—hard to pass through, hard to pass out of.

“The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life.”

But in this case, the road to life led most people to death. For Niemüller and a handful of others who had had some choice about the road that led them to Sachsenhausen and camps like it, there were worse things than death. For Niemüller a worse thing would have been to be unfaithful to God and to the teachings of the Gospel.

As I mentioned a moment ago, Niemüller and others like Dietrich Bonhoeffer were not satisfied with what they did in their struggle to keep the church faithful to Jesus.

Bonhoeffer wrote during the war,

The church confesses that she has witnessed the application of brutal force, the physical and spiritual suffering of countless innocent people, oppression, hatred and murder, and that she has not raised her voice on behalf of the victims and has not found ways to hasten to their aid. She is guilty of the death of the weakest and most defenseless brothers of Jesus Christ [the Jews].

Still, they stood as a small voice of truth and sanity at a time when those things were hard to come by.

One night at dinner I sat beside a man, Franz von Hammerstein, who had been confirmed by Pastor Niemüller in the late 1930s. His father had been the head of the German army when Hitler came to power, but he resigned as soon as Hitler made known to him his plans for war. His mother brought Franz to Pastor Niemüller for confirmation class, although the family was Catholic, because she saw him as a tiny island of integrity, someone who remembered what the Christian faith was supposed to be about. Franz paid for his association with his family and his church—he was sent to Buchenwald camp as a teenager, though he had done nothing himself. But none of that did he regret. As someone else said to me, “At that time, the only place for a faithful Christian was in the camps.”

Germany has come a long way towards dealing with the legacy of the Holocaust. Of course there is a long way to go. On Shabbat some of us went to services at a synagogue that had been destroyed by the Nazis before the war, and had just recently been rebuilt. There, a small faithful remnant of Berlin's once-flourishing Jewish community had gathered, including some beautiful children, who wandered around the worship space freely noisily and joyfully—like our children do here!

On the way to the synagogue, and in all that area of Berlin, we saw little brass plaques in the sidewalks. Called stumbling blocks, they are raised a tiny bit from the surface of the sidewalk. They bear the name of a Jewish person or family who lived in that neighborhood before the holocaust. There are large memorials to the murdered Jews of Europe in other parts of Berlin, but of course those are avoidable, should one wish to avoid them. The stumbling blocks catch you as you are walking along, on your way to the subway or to catch a bus. They help make sure that we can never forget.

When it is faithful, the church ought to be like those stumbling blocks. Small and annoying, and impossible to ignore. Witnessing to the word of God, as we seek to travel through a narrow gate. Being faithful to our Jewish founder, as we travel along his hard road. Knowing that though that road may lead to death, it is the only way to life.

Let us pray:

Many peoples have suffered cruelty, and our hearts go out to them. But this day we think especially of the pain suffered by the House of Israel. Exile and oppression, expulsion and ghettos, programs and death camps: the agony of this people numbs the mind and turns the heart to stone. When we consider this, we are tempted to say with one of the poets: "To me the whole world is one gallows."

We were there but we didn't speak up. It was easier not to know.
We were there when they came for our Jewish neighbors.
We were there when they deported the communists.
We were there when they burned the wagons of gypsies.
We were there when they put away the lesbians and gay men.
We were there when they killed our disabled relatives.

We were there when they came for Mennonites and Jehovah's Witnesses.
We were there but we didn't speak up; it was easier not to know.

We are there today wherever our sisters and brothers suffer for their beliefs or ethnicity:
We are there today in the Sudan, in Darfur, in Pakistan, in India, in Indonesia, in
Palestine, in Israel, in Northern Ireland; in Iraq, in Washington DC or New York. We
are here, but it is easier not to know. We are there wherever racism and hate have a
final word. We are there wherever children are used as soldiers.
We are there and there is silence. And there was silence!

Remembering our silence,
Remembering our indifference,
Remembering the secret complicity of the neutral,
Remembering the closing of borders,
Remembering the washing of hands,
We confess our sins before the throne of Glory, seeking not only solace, but strength for
renewal; not forgetfulness, but healing for all who are wounded: we pray that those
who have tormented others will find recognition and repentance; we pray that those
who have been tormented will find healing, and, perhaps, the grace to forgive. Amen.

Hineh mah tov umah nayim, shevet achim gam yachad

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in harmony.