

PITTSBURGH – 2018

A REFLECTION

So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead

Letter of James 2:17

I first heard about the Pittsburgh tragedy at the Edmonton Islamic Academy of Learning as we were about to begin a day of dialogue between Christians and Moslems. Hearing the news of these horrible killings was like receiving a kick in the stomach. Like all shocks it was disorienting and confusing and, as always, there was that most inadequate of questions – Why! We had our moments of silence but it was some time before I could be present to my dialogue partners.

Upon my return to Winnipeg I heard of the planned memorial to take place at Congregation Shaarey Zedek. It seemed right and just that Winnipeggers should come in their hundreds to stand with the Jewish Community. People embraced, they prayed together, they sang hymns and they lit candles. For one beautiful and powerful moment the people of Winnipeg stood in solidarity with the Jewish community – then they went home and life continued. As time went on a voice began to whisper to me that something was not right. Then the whisper gave way to a full throated cry – there is no context! This is not enough! In all honesty, I do not want to attend the funerals of murdered Jews!

Because I remember does not necessarily mean that I understand. The teaching of contempt that so many have spoken of continues its 1800 year march through human history. It is critical to understand that the Catholic Church and other Christian churches have enabled this teaching of contempt. The Shoah was not an historical aberration but rather it was the culmination of a long, constant and consistent persecution of a people.

On October 28, 1965, fifty three years almost to the very day prior to the killings in Pittsburgh, the Catholic Church promulgated a teaching originating from its highest authority. This teaching is known as *Nostra Aetate* and it repudiated the lie that Jews were Christ killers and in no uncertain terms forbade any type of persecution against the Jews. This teaching was followed up by documents giving direction as to how *Nostra Aetate* should be implemented. There were learned discussions of the relationship between Jews and Christians. Countless other types of meetings have occurred on the subject. Despite all of this anti-Semitism around the world is on the rise (the Federal Bureau of Investigation reported on November 19, 2018 that in 2017 hate crimes in the U.S surged by 17% and “included a corresponding jump in anti-Semitic attacks...”). The shooting in Pittsburgh on October 27, 2018 is the teaching of contempt writ large. Inasmuch as the killer in Pittsburgh murdered innocent, peaceful, worshipping Jews in

their own synagogue, he is a direct descendant of the men of the einsatzgruppen – and this in 2018!

Nor is this only about the Jews. Majdanec Concentration Camp was one of the killing grounds used by the Nazis during the Shoah. After the war a memorial was erected to honour those murdered in the camp. This memorial structure features a message that has been placed close to its roof. The message is:

Let our fate be a warning to you.

Many years later, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks presented the concept of the Jews as filing the role of the canary in the mine. He makes the argument that the presence and rise of anti-Semitism is symptomatic of fundamental problems in society at large. We are in this thing together and in order to understand this reality we need to rigorously examine Rabbi Sacks' concept.

I would agree that attending memorials may be necessary but I would vigorously argue that it is nearly not enough. A memorial is primarily reactive. Now, more than ever, we need to be vigilant and proactive in our response to the challenge of hate. How does this happen in our community of Winnipeg? Some ideas:

- Would it be possible to explore Rabbi Sacks' notion of anti-Semitism being a symptom of deeper ills in society? Is it true? If so, how do we understand it?
- The killer of innocents in Pittsburgh was captured alive. Can we discover some idea as to why he concluded that the only solution was to kill Jews? What were the enablers?
- Is it possible for The Manitoba MultiFaith Council to encourage its membership to teach in its faith communities the history of the Teaching of Contempt and its impact on all of us?
- Would it be possible for the Manitoba MultiFaith Council to declare in 2019 a year against hate?

These are just some suggestions. I'm sure there are many more out there. What is required is proactive action. We cannot ask God to "fix" this. We are required to take responsibility. Otherwise, we will attend more funerals and memorials and we will simply embrace the impotency of a group of rag tag musicians playing comforting tunes on the deck of a sinking Titanic.

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