

## **BE THE CHURCH: REJECT RACISM**

### **Ephesians 6:10-20**

Kelly B. Brill  
Avon Lake UCC  
15 January 2017

What do you think you would you have done in this following situation? It's a true story. The Jewish community of Nesvich in eastern Poland got word that the Nazis were coming for them on July 21, 1942. They didn't have to imagine how bad it would be. It wasn't the first time they'd seen the brutalities of the German army. The previous October, the great majority of their community had been murdered. Now there was to be the slaughter of those who remained. They decided that they would rather fight than die quietly.

On the morning of July 21, the mobile killing squad unit appeared at the gate of the Nesvich Jewish ghetto and soon opened fire. The fighting unit in the synagogue responded with a surprise volley of machine-gun fire. The Germans crashed through the ghetto gate. The Jews drew their knives and irons. Like the biblical David against Goliath, they reached for their pile of stones...The Germans increased their firing. A battle began between Jews with steel weapons and Germans and police with guns.

Soon the dead and dying filled the streets. As previously planned, Jews set fire to their homes to provide cover for any one who might be able to flee. The ghetto exploded in chaos.

Three resistance fighters waited in an attic for a chance to escape from the ghetto. They observed crowds of Polish citizens, most if not all of whom would have been Christians, excitedly watching and cheering as Jews were shot. Finally, the three

resistance fighters saw an opening. They ran out of the ghetto and then into the grain fields, in search of refuge in the forest just beyond.

Escape from the ghetto did not guarantee safety for the Nesvizh Jews, however. Once outside, some were beaten by civilians, most if not all of whom would have been Christians. The three, as they were running, observed one of their Jewish friends carrying his small son wrapped in a pillow. As he ran, he passed the bundle to a Christian woman standing near the gate, and then he continued running towards the woods.

What would you have done, do you think, if you'd been handled that little bundle of life, that little Jewish baby?

A couple of years ago, Doug and I visited the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, an experience I highly recommend. One section of the museum is dedicated to resisters and rescuers. I was curious about how it was that some countries produced so many more resisters than others. The countries of Denmark and Sweden, for example, pulled off an amazing smuggling operation helping 8,000 Jews escape from Denmark to Sweden. Denmark had fewer Jewish casualties than any other occupied country, due to the cooperation from a majority of its citizens.

Why were some Christian people more likely than others to take the risk to rescue Jews from the Nazis? There are many factors, of course, but one factor is particularly telling. Those Christians who had close Jewish friends and associates were more likely to summon the moral courage to resist. For one thing, they were not taken in by Nazi propaganda telling them that non-Jews were vastly superior to Jews in worth

and dignity. For the Nazi regime to take hold among the majority of citizens, it needed not only to reign with fear and terror, it also needed to convince ordinary people that Jews were subhuman, outside the boundaries of moral obligation. Many Christians who risked their lives on behalf of Jewish people had personal ties with Jewish people before the rise of the Third Reich.

Our United Church of Christ statement of faith calls us to “resist the powers of evil.” We have, in the stories of Holocaust rescuers, of Christians in the resistance movement, great examples and role models. On the one hand, we look back through the lens of history and realize that the evil that was faced during World War II was beyond description or argument; it was unequivocally evil. On the other hand, it is almost impossible for us to put ourselves in that situation and imagine the difficulty of knowing that your moral act would put your life and the lives of your loved ones at stake.

What does it mean to resist evil when the evil is more subtle, when the face of evil is not Adolph Hitler or a stormtrooper, but rather, the relentless legacy of racism in our own country? We don’t have people knocking on our doors, begging for a hiding place. We don’t have people handing us babies as they run out of town in fear for their lives.

What we have are statistics and stories. The statistics tell us that people of color lag behind whites in homeownership, household wealth and median income, among other indicators. And these differences remain even when controlling for levels of education.

Speaking of education, the method of school funding in most states results in vast inequity in the quality of school buildings and programming. The better-funded schools are attended by students who, arguably, need the advantages the least ... students of predominantly white families with higher income, higher education levels. Students of lower income families, many of whom are people of color, are less likely to have access to schools with gifted programs, programs in the arts, and schools with the best physical resources.

When we look at these factors of income and education, as well as housing practices and other factors, we see an unfair distribution of wealth and power based on the unspoken assumption that “white is better.”

Is this fair? Is this Christian? If we look at the values given to us in the Bible, the call for justice that cries out from the prophets, the example Jesus gives us of treating all people with dignity and respect, Paul’s description of a world where all are treated equally, what is an appropriate Christian response?

We have statistics and we have stories. Stories upon stories of professional African-American men, dressing professionally, acting professionally, who are treated with disdain and looked upon with fear. Is this fair? Is this Christian?

Our passage for today calls us to see with clear eyes the forces of evil that exist in our world, and to combat them, using the resources of our faith. There are stories in the New Testament that seem particularly relevant and instructive. I think of the story of the Pharisee in the synagogue. He sees a tax collector who is praying. The Pharisee says, loudly, so everyone can hear him, “Thank you, God, that I am not like that tax

collector.” It’s not a real prayer, of course, it’s not an honest communication with God. No, he’s showing off. Mostly it’s his hypocrisy that’s showing. When I think honestly and personally about racism, I think of this story. I am like the Pharisee. I would rather look at other people who are more overtly racist, and criticize them, than face my own prejudice.

I am convicted, as I read about the Holocaust resisters, and as I confront the racism that exists, much as I hate to admit it, in my own heart and mind, to realize that one of the solutions is for me to engage more with people of color. I need more friends who are different than me, whose life experience can teach me more than any book or movie, about the prevalence of racism and the need for its rejection.

It is so easy today to pretend that we have put prejudice behind us. Put a few inclusive quotes on your Facebook page, sign a petition, wear a button, and make fun of people whose racism is more overt. But how do we do the things that are harder? How do we expand our circle of friends? How do we speak up when we hear a racist joke or a more serious slur that refuses to take seriously the lived experience of people of color? What do we say when we hear what we know is a myth, the perpetuation of a stereotype?

I love what one writer has said about our passage for today. She reminds us that our battle is not against other people. Our battle is against those forces of evil that can take hold of people and be embraced by people. We are called to resist, reject, and battle racism; it is that system which is our enemy. Making enemies of individual people

who are racist is more of a distraction. We fight for what's right, we don't fight to BE right. In the fight for what's right we become right.

There is so much at stake in this battle; one thing that's at stake is the reputation of the Christian church.

Because there are people who claim to be both Christian AND white supremacists, there are others who assume that most Christians are racist. There are many people who assume that most Christians are bigoted, hateful, and judgmental. We have to proclaim, with our words, and with our actions, that we are trying to build a world committed to racial equality.

The Holocaust was a triangular affair involving three parties: German perpetrators, Jewish victims, and local non-Jewish bystanders, most of whom were Christians. The Christian bystanders had to decide how to relate to both perpetrators and victims while facing the grim and often all-consuming struggles that afflicted every European during the war. It was an intense moral crucible. They faced these choices. They could add harm, helping the killers destroy those they considered unworthy of life. They could prevent harm, helping the designated victims resist destruction. Or they could do nothing, remaining neutral. Most chose to do nothing. We understand why. But when power is unequal, doing nothing aids the more powerful. Neutrality eased the task of the Nazi murderers.

It was approximately 1% of Christians who stood in solidarity with the Jews and refused to allow them to be treated as outside the boundaries of moral obligation. Because of this 1%, we have stories of moral courage, we have at least 250,000 lives

that were saved. Because of this minority, there are stories of hope that have emerged from one of the bleakest moments in all of human history.

I think this is my favorite of all of the quotes from Martin Luther King: ““The saving of our world from pending doom will come, not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority, but through the creative maladjustment of a nonconforming minority.”

We are called to be the church. We don't have to be the majority, we don't have to be the loudest, we don't have to call names. But we have to find ways to resist the evils, include the evil of racism, even and especially when it calls us to honest, humble, and risk-taking.

We don't know what happened to that baby passed along in a pillow. Was he or she handed over to a Nazi soldier to be smashed against the side of a wall? Or was that child one of the quarter-million rescued, hidden, and saved by a committed Christian resister? Will we choose to be among the righteous minority...the people who save the world?

I am indebted to these sources for help with this sermon: a conversation with the Rev. John C. Dorhauer, and the book, Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust, by David Gushee.