

St. Thomas Lutheran Church
Sunday, August 26, 2018 (Pentecost B-16)
Marie F. Fleming

Joshua 24: 1,2a, 14-18
Eph 6:10-20
John 6:56-69

RESIDENT ALIENS

"...As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

This is our fifth week of Bread passages, brought to us by the 6th Chapter of John. In today's text, Jesus tells his disciples, including the large crowd that is given that designation – what it means to serve him. Most find the teaching too hard and choose to leave Jesus' company. When Jesus turns to the twelve and asks, "Do you want to go away too?" we hear that phrase that is central to our liturgy, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life!"

In a similar vein, Joshua as he comes to the end of his life wants to be certain that the children of Israel know who they are and whose they are. Choose, he challenges, choose right now whom you will serve – the gods from the Old Country? The gods from this new home? Or the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt into this promised land. "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD"

The small village of Le Chambon is a remarkable example of a community who chose to serve the LORD. Their devotion to the love of Christ made all the difference "during the most terrible years of World War 2, when inhumanity and political insanity held most of the world in their grip and the Nazi domination of Europe seemed irrevocable and unchallenged. Between 1940 and 1944, the villagers and pastor of this Protestant town in the mostly Catholic south of France quietly, peacefully, and in full view of the Vichy government and a nearby division of the Nazi SS, organized to save more than 5000 people fleeing Nazi persecution, 3500 of whom were Jews." (Amazon.com)

Their story is told in Philip Hallie's 1994 book, "Lest Innocent Blood be Shed: The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened there."

The decision to become a place of refuge was fueled by a meeting between Pastor Andre' Trocme' and Burns Chalmers, who was responsible for many of the Quakers' activities on behalf of the inmates of the prison camps in southern France. Upon his return from that meeting, Pastor Trocme' convened the parish council and presented to them the idea of opening their

village and their own houses to strangers who would bring danger with them. The parish committed to the task in just one meeting. (Hallie)

Pastor Trocme' and his wife, Magda, were the heart and soul of the village's efforts. The two provided strategic and practical leadership (he was involved in organizational liaisons with regional and international groups and, of course, was the community's religious leader. She was the one who met every person who came to the presbytery door with open arms, leading them to her kitchen for a meal; employing her sewing machine to mend or alter clothing; housing them – as did other villagers - for various lengths of time while arrangements were made to move them more deeply into safety. Yes, the Trocmes were examples and pillars in this work, but the Polar Star of selfless love and service that guided them and the rest of the parish was set in place long before the war invaded their world. Magda Trocme explains:

(From website, FacingHistory.org):

“Those of us who received the first Jews did what we thought had to be done—nothing more complicated. It was not decided from one day to the next what we would have to do. There were many people in the village who needed help. How could we refuse them? A person doesn't sit down and say I'm going to do this and this and that. We had no time to think. When a problem came, we had to solve it immediately. Sometimes people ask me, “How did you make a decision?” There was no decision to make. The issue was: Do you think we are all brothers or not? Do you think it is unjust to turn in the Jews or not? Then let us try to help!”

Significantly, part of the Chambonnais' motivation was to prevent their enemies from committing the sin of murder.

Historian Marianne Ruel Robins notes:

“The fact that an entire community participated (or watched and said nothing) is remarkable indeed. The silence observed by the people of the Plateau was an important condition for its success, not simply because it sheltered Jews from external threats, but also because it minimized internal dissent....Silence did not necessarily imply that everyone agreed on the reasons for hiding Jews, but rather that most people came to agree that something ought to be done.”

In an interview for Hallie's book, Magda Trocme' reflected on her choices years after the war, she said, “When people read this story, I want them to know that I tried to open my door. I tried to tell people, ‘Come in, come in.’ In the end I would like to say to people, ‘Remember that in your life there will be lots of circumstances where you will need a kind of courage, a kind of decision on your own, not about other people but about yourself.’ End of quote.

And while individuals time and again were called upon to do what needed to be done in real time, trusting their judgment of the situation, it seems clear that their life together is what gave them courage. And when the war came to them, they responded in the only way they knew.

CS Lewis in his “Screwtape Letters” talks about the “two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall” regarding the existence of evil – which he calls “the devils”: One is to disbelieve in their existence, the other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. The devils themselves are equally pleased by both errors.”

The people of Le Chambon were not naïve about the power of evil. Many of them lost their lives defending others. All lost loved ones. But they simply were not daunted by it. They behaved according to a higher power. They acted on their conviction that humans could be redeemed, and a determination to do everything they could do to serve that redemptive work.

I think of the armor Paul writes about. Presbyterian pastor, Doug Bratt, points out that Paul doesn’t invite his readers to arm ourselves so that we can terrorize and intimidate others. We arm ourselves to defend ourselves...The defensive nature of the armor with which Paul invites his readers to clad ourselves subverts the tools of Empire which were the daily reality of his readers. Paul recasts these symbols of fear and pain into instruments of peace. This scripture must have been beloved by the Chambonaiss.

One of the devil’s most effective wiles is to convince us that our enemies cannot be redeemed.

A recent editorial in the Herald Times featured Daryl Davis, a Jazz musician and devoted peacemaker. The article focused on Davis’ efforts at combatting prejudice and hate through conversation. As a young person of color, he experienced racist violence against himself person. He asked, “How can they hate me when they don’t even know me?” His search for an answer led to an unlikely relationship with Roger Kelly,” who at the time was Maryland’s Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan. Over the course of a few years, Kelly’s position on race “cracked”, until he resigned from his position in the Klan, along with about 200 other members. For Davis, it is a simple formula: “When two enemies are talking, they aren’t fighting.” “When you are actively listening to someone else, they are passively learning about you.” (H-T Aug.20, 2018)

When the soldiers came for Pastor Trocme’ the household was eating supper. Ever the gracious host, Magda invited the head of the arresting party, a Mr. Salvani, to join them at table. It was a cold and dreary night, after all, and he must be hungry. Meanwhile, word of the impending arrest spread quickly through the parish and the “community streamed into the presbytery dining room to give their pastor some of their most precious possessions to take with him to prison. While Salvani sat there, cast down and weeping over untasted food.” (Hallie)

Teachers and scholars Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon write in a book called “Resident Aliens” that the church “is not called primarily to engage and transform the culture, the church is called to be its own culture. It has its own language, words like doxology and repentance. It has its own cuisine – bread and wine. With these practices the church forms a community, not individuals, to be a counterculture – a kingdom community that witnesses to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

“The church can become a place where our differences, including our political convictions, are subsumed under the claim that we’ve been made one, despite what we may like or feel, in our common baptism in the Holy Trinity, who is a community of peace amid difference.”

“Christians are called not simply to make the world a better place. Christians are called to be the better place God has already made in the world in our time and place.” (Jason Mitchell, *The Christian Century*, August 1, 2018)

May it be so for us, to the glory of God through Jesus Christ, who is the only Lord and King we will ever need. AMEN