

Teaching Old Dogs New Tricks

Shared at Shadow Rock United Church of Christ on Christmas Eve

December 24, 2009

Rev. Ken Heintzelman and Peg Heintzelman

Peg and I served a small church in Henderson KY for about 4 years. The name of this congregation is Zion United Church of Christ. Before it was a UCC church it was a German immigrant founded Evangelical and Reformed Church. In this small fellowship there were a few older members who had outlived most of their family and their circumstances were such that they would spend Christmas Eve alone until the 11 pm candlelight service. Peg and I started to invite them over for Christmas Eve dinner and then we would go to church together.

One of these people was Mr. Feix. He lived in Henderson KY his whole 94 years. He was born, grew up, married, raised children, owned his own business, and died in Henderson KY. He was a good man with an infectious high tonsil laugh. Mr. Feix was also a product of his culture, and while Henderson, KY sits on the Ohio River and only a mile from the Indiana border, it is much further South culturally then it looks on the map.

Mr. Feix would ask me over to his house every couple of months for breakfast. He would fix coffee and waffles and we would eat and talk. One morning he told me a story about a parade going down a main street in Henderson heading toward downtown and the riverfront. In the front of the parade was a horse honor guard. The horses were lined up front and center with fancy saddles and special leather flag holsters. Riding in the saddles and proudly holding the flags were men in white robes and hoods and on the hoods was the symbol of the Ku Klux Klan. It was a time and place in history that such men could ride proudly and openly down the main streets of our cities. It was a time in our history when such a public display of prejudicial power was hardly questioned let alone challenged. The parade would move down this major street pass the Methodist Church, the Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the Baptist Church without a single word of truth or love to challenge the honor guard. There was no word of challenge from the German Evangelical and Reformed Church either. Of course, the German immigrants who founded Zion were too cheap to buy property on the main street of town. The building of German immigrant churches often happened 1-2 blocks off the main streets in order to get a better deal on the property. This worked for the congregations as long as one generation of family would replace another, but as the world changed and opportunity and education pushed and pulled generations away from their home towns, so these congregations began to die in their isolation and lack of visibility. Regardless of location it is still highly doubtful that there would have been a word from Zion.

The parade would go by all of these churches and their silence would be compliance if not affirmation of prejudice and violence. After all what did the KKK

have to do with the message of Jesus and the work of the Church? The Methodists, Presbyterians, Evangelicals, Lutherans, and Baptists had no quarrel with the KKK. In fact, some of the KKK were Methodists, Baptists, Evangelicals, Presbyterians, and Lutherans. Let them go and say nothing. However, the parade did not go without a hitch. There was one trouble maker. Closest to downtown was the Catholic Church. As the honor guard got close to the Catholic Church the priest pulled his large convertible out of the parking lot into the middle of the street and successfully blocking the parade.

Mr. Feix stood by me with a hot fresh waffle dangling by a fork. He stopped in mid sentence and looked far away for a moment. He caught himself and summed up the story quickly, "One of those Klan members moved his horse around to the driver's side, pulled out a gun with the longest barrel on it I have ever seen, pointed in the priest's face and told him to move his car or get his head blown off!" Mr. Feix laughed his high pitch laugh and finished the story, "That priest moved his car!" This was the Mr. Feix we had over for Christmas Eve dinner.

(Peg shares her part of the story here)

It was a cold, snowy Christmas Eve and the wind was whipping the snow into near white-out conditions. It was already a Christmas destined to be remembered because Ken's parents and brothers, Chuck and Doug were in Pakistan. You see, Chuck was marrying the love of his life, Asrah on Christmas Day. Normally Ken's family would have been with us for Christmas Eve – we would have dinner and then go to the Candle light service together.

For a few years, we had invited Thelma Grey and Clarence Feix to share Christmas Eve with our family as their families lived far away. It gave us so much joy to share our evening with them and that year they would join us once again. I'm not sure when we knew that we would be sharing our Christmas Eve with another family. Ken knew of a local minister who was going through a tough time --- he had recently been kicked out of his church. Jim, our guest was a Lutheran minister who had recently gone through a

divorce and the church he was serving had not taken that very well, nor were they pleased that Jim was engaged to an African American woman. So, here it was Christmas Eve, and Jim had no service to conduct or attend.

Ken invited Jim to spend Christmas Eve with our family. Jim asked if his fiancée, Diane and her family could join us as well. We said, “The more the merrier” or something along those lines. Our dinner party had just doubled; we were now a nice round fourteen. Diane’s family included her three beautiful children, her elderly mother and her sister, Clare, who was herself an ordained minister – (I say she was Methodist and Ken says she was Disciples of Christ.)

I knew we could handle it; we would borrow tables and chairs from the church and I would just double everything I had planned to serve – some of you know I don’t really know how to make small quantities of food anyway. Ken said he would fix the ham, (not the best plan). He had seen a recipe’ for ham “stuffed” with a spinach dressing he wanted to try. You might be asking yourself, “How does one stuff a ham?” well, you will just have to ask Ken about that one. Let us just say it involves a large knife, and, our small son, Joshua asking, “Daddy? Why are you killing that ham?”

No, the logistics of the dinner did not trouble me....having Mr. Feix share Christmas Eve dinner with an African American family....given who he was and had been, now that I found worrisome. You see, in his youth, our sweet, gentle Mr. Feix had been a card carrying member of the Klu Klux Klan!

I really should not have worried that Mr. Feix would behave badly; he was after all, first and foremost a southern gentleman. In our home, whom we invited to dinner was our business; period! Mr. Feix was a perfect gentleman and the dinner was soon over. Ken and I breathed a sigh of relief as we all headed out in the snow storm for the Christmas Eve Candle Light Service at Zion United Church of Christ.

So, the fourteen of us arrived to find a completely dark and cold church – the power had gone out! But, no worry! We had candles after all. We decided we would just worship in the Fellowship Hall as it was much smaller. We set everything up and we waited for all the rest of our church family to arrive, and we waited. No one else came. No pianist, no choir, no elders, no one, just the fourteen of us. I remember we sang a verse or two of The First Noel and Angels We have Heard On High, we prayed, Ken preached...

Finally, it was time to share Communion...Ken invited Clare to help him serve. Ken held the bread and Clare the wine and that is when the miracle happened...Mr. Clarence Feix allowed an African American woman to share communion with him on a cold, windy, snowy night in his church, which to him was like his own home. I remember singing a very teary "Silent Night" with our candles held in chilled hands and thinking-knowing that we had been blessed and that the night had been a gift --- to us.

Later when we asked Mr. Feix about Christmas Eve and communion he cocked his head to the side, looked up at us and said, “Well, I guess you can teach an old dog new tricks.” Aha, ha, ha, ha!

Conclusion

We can have some unrealistic expectations connected to Christmas. Christmas can be a pleasant distraction from the troubles of the world and a time for indulging in escapism and warm fuzzies. To do this is okay and the Church can even help as we celebrate the goodness of life. However, if this is all we do then we relegate ourselves to irrelevance and an opium for the masses. I think it is better to lay all the cards of life on the table of life. The truth is....

We still have our struggles for emotional and mental health.

We still have nation states bombing civilian populations thus drowning out the song of Silent Night.

We still have families who have no money, or food, or shelter.

Our beloved pets die.

Our treasured loved ones die.

We still have refugees and displaced people who have no idea what tomorrow will bring them.

We still have children and spouses waiting for their loved ones to come home from war.

We still have ignorance, prejudice, and violence.

It was in this kind of world that people said love is stronger than hate, hope is stronger than despair, and light is greater than darkness. The message of Christmas is that love comes to a love starved world. The meaning of Christmas is that there is hope. There is hope and there are enough instances of the realization of our hopes to keep hoping. The old dog of the world can still learn new tricks.