



## **Rev Chris Taylor – 10/28/18**

### **Can The Blind See?**

On November 7, 1938, a seventeen year old German Jew shot and killed an official in the German Embassy in Paris. The young man's father had recently been put in a crowded boxcar and deported to Poland. This was his revenge. It was a cry of despair and angry rebellion wrapped together in a single, violent act.

The shooting in Paris, however, gave Hitler and the Nazis the pretext they needed to lash out against the Jews. Hitler gave the command, and at 1:20 a.m. the following morning Reinhard Heydrich sent an urgent Teletype to every Gestapo station across Germany. The message gave explicit directions for what has come to be known as Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass). On November 9 and 10, Jewish homes and businesses were destroyed and looted. Synagogues were set aflame, and Jews across Germany were beaten and killed.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was teaching at a small, underground seminary at the time. Reflecting a commonly accepted theory, one of his students suggested Kristallnacht was part of the curse that lay upon the Jewish community. He and his fellow students didn't condone what had happened, but believed the reason for the evils inflicted upon the Jews must reflect the curse they had incurred for rejecting Christ. It was nonsense, and Bonhoeffer refuted their interpretation. A few days later he went even further, writing a letter that he intended to have circulated throughout the community.

Reflecting on what had happened in the light of Scripture, Bonhoeffer believed that the synagogues that had been burned were God's own, and that the Nazis weren't just attacking a vulnerable and historically maligned minority, but were attacking God's own people – God's beloved children. He quoted Zechariah 2:8, "For thus said the Lord of hosts, after his glory sent me to the nations who plundered you, for he who touches you touches the apple of his eye." For Bonhoeffer, the Jews were and are and would always remain the "apple" of God's eye!

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When I heard what happened yesterday at the Tree of Life synagogue, I threw away the message that I had prepared. I know this is Stewardship Sunday. I know it is Reformation Sunday. This is a big day for us, but some things are more important, some things we just have to address, and surely this is one of them.

Another act of violence. There have been at least 200 mass shootings in 2018. Some suggest as many as three or four hundred. Only this time it wasn't in Nevada or Florida or California. This time, it was right here in Pittsburgh. This time it was in our home. And this time it was members of the Jewish community who were specifically, intentionally targeted. "Death to all Jews." That's what that Robert Bowers reportedly cried out as he opened fire in the synagogue with his assault rifle.

We would like to think that anti-Semitism in this country is on the decline. We would like to think that we, as a nation, are past that – educated enough, bright enough, to have moved beyond such narrow-minded bigotry and prejudice. But clearly, we have not.

I was surprised the other day (even before the shooting) to hear the Governor of New York say that there has been an enormous increase in attacks on the Jewish community. Where have we been? How come we

haven't been hearing about this? In 2016 alone, 48 bomb threats were called in to Jewish community centers across the country. In 2017, anti-Semitic incidents surged 57% over the previous year; the second-highest number since the Anti-Defamation League started tracking incidents some forty years ago. This year, apparently, it is even worse.

Consider the Unite the Right rally that we saw in Charlottesville just over a year ago: hundreds of marchers offering Nazi salutes and waving flags with swastikas, chanting "Jews will not replace us." These aren't just illiterate extremists. The year before two swastikas were found painted on a bathroom wall in the main library of Swarthmore. Reports of anti-Semitic incidents have come out of Oberlin, the University of California at Los Angeles, Brown and Northwestern. All of these schools, like Swarthmore, considered liberal bastions.

The bottom line is that over the last few years we have seen a frightening rise in attacks not just against Jews, but against Muslims, blacks, gays and immigrants – attacks against minorities, attacks against the most vulnerable in our midst. We are seeing a rise across the board in divisive, hate-filled rhetoric and behavior. But make no mistake, it is the Jewish community that continues to be a favorite target. According to FBI statistics for 2014, of religiously motivated hate crimes, Jews were targeted 57 percent of the time. The next highest, the Muslim community, stood at 16 percent by comparison.

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Yesterday, when I heard the news one of the first things I did was reach out to Rabbi Yaier Lehrer over at Adat Shalom. When I asked what would be most helpful he replied, "I think the most meaningful thing anyone can do at this time is denounce hate from our pulpits and recite prayers for those who have suffered physical, emotional or spiritual loss." Denounce hate and offer prayer.

Writing in the Washington Post about the rise in anti-Semitism all the way back in February of 2017, author Mark Oppenheimer noted that in Europe, where Jews have been murdered, and synagogues and Jewish businesses attacked, there has been no great public outcry; no swelling of support for the Jewish community amid these attacks. No, he writes, the most chilling thing about it has been the widespread public indifference<sup>ii</sup>.

Indifference is the one course that we, as Christians, cannot follow. We cannot stand on the sidelines. We cannot watch safely from a distance and remain silent and still be faithful to the Gospel. Scripture calls us to stand with the persecuted and the oppressed. Christ calls us to the way of love. Denounce hate and offer prayer.

Kristallnacht was not the first time Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke up in defense of the Jews. On September 15, 1935 the Nuremberg Laws for the protection of German Blood and German Honor were introduced. They forbade marriage between Jews and German citizens; Jews were forbidden from employing female citizens, and forbidden to display the Reich or national flag. For Bonhoeffer, the time had come for the church to take a stand. In his biography of Bonhoeffer, author Eric Metaxas puts it this way:

Bonhoeffer believed it was the role of the church to *speak for those who could not speak...* Boldly speaking out for those who were being persecuted would show the Confessing Church to be the church, because just as Bonhoeffer had written that Jesus Christ was the "man for others," so the church was his body on this earth, a community in which Christ was present – a community that existed "for others." To serve others outside the church, to love as one loved oneself, and to do unto them as one would have others do unto oneself, these were the clear commands of Christ.

"Only he who cries out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chants" [Bonhoeffer declared]. As far as he was concerned, to dare to sing to God when [God's] chosen people were being beaten and murdered

meant that one must also speak out against their suffering. If one was unwilling to do this, God was not interested in one's worship<sup>iii</sup>.

What should we do in the light of those attacks yesterday? We need to take a stand. We need, along with Christians and Muslims and people of every race and every persuasion to rise up and say, "These brothers and sisters do not stand alone." We will not tolerate bigotry. We will not tolerate hatred. We choose, instead, the way of love...

May God guide us and use us all as together we take a stand for what is right and true and good this day and in all the days ahead.

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<sup>i</sup> Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, 2010), pp. 314-317

<sup>ii</sup> Mark Oppenheimer, "Is Anti-Semitism Truly on the Rise in the US? It's Not So Clear", *Washington Post*, Feb. 17, 2017

<sup>iii</sup> Metaxas, *Ibid.*, pp. 280-281