Rising From the Ashes

By Rev. Madelyn Campbell

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When I was a little girl, I lived in the northern tip of Manhattan. It was the 1960’s, and my neighborhood had a lot of Dominican immigrants, and I knew some Puerto Rican families, too. And there were other white families who weren’t Jewish - we were Jewish. I knew that we had different foods at home, but we all got the same pretzels and egg creams at the little store on 10th Ave.

At school there were even more children - more Dominican and Puerto Rican children, black children, white children, some who were Jewish, most who were Catholic, probably some Protestant kids. I knew there were Protestants in the world. And beyond my school I’d met some Buddhists and some Hindus - although I didn’t know any children who were Buddhist or Hindu. And no one told me that we weren’t supposed to get along or play together, so we got along and we played together.

We didn’t all dress alike. We didn’t all believe the same things. We didn’t all eat the same things. But we were all friends. I thought that’s how the whole world was.

I was wrong.

When I was seven, we moved to the suburbs. The first thing I noticed was that almost everyone was white. There was one black family in my whole elementary school, and most of the other kids didn’t invite that family over to play.

And it was in the suburbs, in the fifth grade, in the early 1970s, where I got attacked after school. Jumped - by six boys in my class - who started to attack me because I was Jewish. And Jews killed Jesus. They’d learned that at home and at their Catholic Church, even though this was after Vatican II. Even though this was more than 25 years after the end of the Holocaust.

Holocaust - I don’t like to use that word because the root really implies a holy fire, and there was nothing holy about it. The Hebrew word is *Shoah* - whirlwind.

*Yom HaShoah* - Day of the *Shoah* - or Holocaust Remembrance Day is recognized in the United States beginning at sundown on April 15 through sundown on April 16. That’s this coming Wednesday evening. There is some politics to this - in most countries this day is recognized on January 27, the day Auschwitz was liberated by the Soviet army. We don’t like recognizing achievements of the Soviets in the United States, so we remember on the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising Regardless of the day we choose, it’s been 70 years — why are we still doing this? Why don’t we just move on? Can’t we just get over it? This is not something we get over.

We do this, we remember, because when I was 10 years old I got attacked for killing Jesus. We do this because, even though we’ve said “Never Again” - it’s been happening again and again and again, and we have to keep remembering until we get it right. We do this because in 1915, the Turks exterminated about 1.5 million Armenians in a genocide that was all but forgotten by the time Hitler came to power, and Hitler learned from this that the world is not interested in the fate of other people.

So today we will remember. We will look back so that we can look ahead. We will look at history to learn from it, and we will honor the dead so that we may then go on and live.

Now, it will probably not come as a shock to you to know that I’m a religious person. This is probably an advantage in a minister. But religion - any religion - can be wielded for good or ill. Recently, a militant atheist, and self-avowed follower of Richard Dawkins, was charged in the murder of three Muslims in North Carolina. He wielded his atheist faith as a weapon. This is just the most recent example of hate and twisted beliefs ending in violence. And this was just one man acting on his own.

In Europe in the middle ages, the church was teaching that Jews were inferior - that the New Testament superseded the Hebrew Scriptures, and that Jews had been offered and rejected salvation through Christ. Because the Jews had different customs, ate different food, dressed differently, they were treated with suspicion. And because of the Jews’ strict adherence to the 613 commandments in scripture, and due to their living apart in most communities - something that was forced upon them, by the way, when the black plague came to Europe, Jews were generally not affected. So Christians started blaming the Jews for the plague.

This blaming Jews for bad things that happen - it goes way back. And Jews were, in most European countries, living in ghettos apart from the rest of society, even in places like Poland, where the Jews were able to interact freely with the general society. The big exception was Germany. In Germany, Jews assimilated into German culture. Eventually.

But the history was there. The history was there. And when Hitler rose to power, he needed someone to blame for Germany’s troubles. And Jews were convenient.

When the Nazis started marching through the rest of Europe, they began rounding up the Jews from those countries as well. Six million Jews perished, and six million others. Jews and Roma people in particular were marked for extermination. Others were rounded up and placed in concentration camps to be sure, and many died - homosexuals, communists, blacks, the disabled, political dissidents, pacifists. But Jews and the Roma people were marked for annihilation.

In Poland, it was punishable by death to help Jews, and it was illegal everywhere. Yet there were many who risked everything to help Jews survive.

We always have choices in life. In 2011, I traveled to Poland with a professor and several other seminary students. For me, this was a journey of self-discovery and forgiveness. I walked through Auschwitz and Birkenau.

I saw gas chambers and unspeakable things. But I also saw remarkable things.

We visited the Pharmacy Under the Eagle, where Tadeusz Pankiewicz was the proprietor. A pharmacist and a physician, Pankiewicz’ pharmacy was in the area in Krakow that the Nazis designated as the new Jewish ghetto during the Shoah, although Pankiewicz wasn’t Jewish. He convinced the Nazis to allow him to stay, saying that it would be a good PR move for them. He used his position to smuggle food into the ghetto and also better drugs than what he could stock on his shelves. He also used his physician’s bag to smuggle out babies, taking them to families who would care for them so that they would not perish. He was absolutely a hero and was named Righteous Among the Nations after the war.

Also in Krakow, we visited Oskar Schindler’s factory.

Schindler saved 1200 Jews from extermination, including children. Their descendants number about 7000 now, more than the total number of Jews currently living in Europe. Schindler has also been named Righteous Among the Nations.

Neither Pankiewicz nor Schindler were Jews. But they saw people who were suffering and they acted. They didn’t see “other” people - they saw people.

After the liberation of the camps, after the horrors of the Shoah were discovered, we said Never Again! Never again will we allow a genocide. Never again will we allow people to cause others to suffer in this way.

How are we doing?

I think not so well. And it didn’t take long. In 1946, as Jews had returned to the homes they knew, there was an uneasy peace in many towns in Europe. In the town of Kielce in Poland, there was a pogrom - a mass attack and murder of the Jews who lived in the town. Today there are monuments to the attack. The Jewish cemetery is locked, but is still vandalized. There are no Jews left in Kielce.

There have been genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia-Hercegovina, and many other places. And walls continue to go up.

The Nazis built a wall in Krakow that was intended to remind the Jews of a cemetery.] The message was clear - you are not leaving this place. That wall has come down, but there are many other walls now. The Israelis - many of whom are survivors and descendants of the Shoah - have built a wall against the Palestinians. Here in the United States, we’ve built a barrier fence against Mexico.

We keep building the walls when we ought to be building bridges.

And walls don’t have to be physical walls. We continue to “other” people in many ways. Indiana has just made it legal to discriminate against people based on their sexuality, and a pizza parlor that’s said they would refuse service for a same-sex wedding (because everyone caters a wedding with pizza?) has just raised a small fortune on a crowd-source funding website. Hate is popular, it seems.

And while a police officer in South Carolina has just been fired and arrested for killing an unarmed black man, the police chief said that it was only because it was caught on video. Apparently, that the man was shot in the back wasn’t enough evidence for him. Still, this is a little progress - at least this man was arrested. Because it’s 2015, and we’re still having to remind people that black lives matter!

That is why we pause to remember. There are no throw-away lives. Every one of those six million Jews, every one of those six million others - the Roma, the political prisoners, the disabled people, the homosexuals, all of them, they were people’s children. They did good things and bad, they had birthdays, they worked, they played music and made art. They laughed, they cried, they loved, and they were silenced.

There are no throw-away people. We don’t have to eat the same foods. We don’t have to like the same music. We don’t have to dress the same, believe the same, pray the same, or speak the same. But we are all part of the family of humanity.

I am a religious person, and I know religion can be used as a force for good or ill. It is a powerful force. Let us use our religion as a force for good. Let us put our faith into action - we can tear down the walls and we can build bridges.

In doing this, we can rise, like a phoenix from the ashes of the crematoriums. We can remember and be stronger. God told Cain “your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground” - it is our duty to amplify that voice. Let it rise - help it rise. Let us remember and raise them up. We raise all of humanity when we do.

Never again.