

Part of my seminary experience was spending a summer with high school youth. The idea was that we supposedly mature graduate-level students would be able to help guide them through the pivotal part of their teenage journey as they tried to figure out what the heck they wanted to do with their life. We would try to show them all the different ways they could serve in the world, even if it meant that they wouldn't necessarily go on to pastor-training school and work in the church realm. We would take them to the Ronald McDonald House and Habitat for Humanity or job-shadowings in the hospital or help lead a vacation Bible school in an inner-city church. Now, some of the younger people took full advantage of the opportunity and ended up taking a path in their early adult life based on their experience on our campus. Others just wanted to get away from home for a few weeks. Others just wanted to experience a world beyond the small speck of America where they grew up.

With that in mind, for starters, we would do our fair share of testing out different ethnic food restaurants. But when we really wanted to open their eyes, we took them to a different place for worship. So, one Saturday morning, we drove to the other side of town to a Reformed synagogue. And yes, it was odd, but not because of the architecture or the worship style. It was odd because we were treated with the warmest hospitality. We were not looked down upon for fumbling with yarmulkes, or not knowing most of what was going on in the worship, including for us supposedly knowledgeable seminary students who should have had a bit of Hebrew down by then. It was almost as if we could actually be part of the same family of God as anyone else in that...yes, holy space.

In the end, it was odd, because we let them know we were coming: a bunch of Lutheran teenagers and mid-twenty somethings. We Lutherans who have a rather...complicated history with our Jewish neighbors. Because as we bear the name of a man who wonderfully blessed us with Ninety-Five Theses and Mighty Fortress beer-drinking hymns and *Small Catechism* material that every single Confirmation student has thoroughly loved diving into for hundreds of years, unfortunately Martin Luther is also responsible for some of the absolute worst written material against the Jewish people.

Of course, it hasn't been just him over the history, who has taken such verses like we heard this morning to the worst parts of our human condition. That one most stinging line from Peter that we can so easily gloss over: "you killed the author of life," as if an entire portion of our family of God who claim membership to a certain faith tradition should be held responsible for a travesty of justice that ensued long ago. We can so easily gloss over that it wasn't them ultimately responsible, but power-hungry people who manipulated a crowd to get their way: who tried to kill the author of life, but instead, only ignited a movement of compassion and peace and love that not even death could withstand.

But going back to those teenagers: part of the daily routine was making our way to the main seminary building through the side courtyard. Along that path is another something that could be so easily glossed over by our eyes and hearts and minds as we're too busy getting to the next destination and trying to figure out what the heck we're doing with life. It is a statue called the Promise of Life, shaped by a man who managed to escape one of the worst mass atrocities in history, unleashed by power-hungry people who attempted to manipulate an entire continent and a whole world in believing that the Jewish people should be utterly removed from God's family. Unfortunately, the architect had 80 from his wider family who did not survive. And, for whatever reason beyond human comprehension, he still managed to proclaim hope and compassion and peace and love through his work, becoming one of the greatest sculptors of his generation in Alfred Tibor.

He came and spoke to the youth, who more than deserved to hear not just about humanity and the Lutherans' checkered past, but for the young people to witness hope that didn't make any sense at all after seeing so much about someone's life torn apart. At one point he read the inscription at the base of his majestic work, "Out of the flames of human hate come the ashes of death. Out of the flame of God's love comes the promise for life." Next month, the seminary will celebrate the 25th anniversary of that Gospel reminder being erected in its courtyard. On the top of that statue is a 27-foot flame with a family reunited in everlasting joy in spite of what the world unleashed against them.

So, yes, the power-hungry tried to kill the author of life, the power-hungry tried to kill off an entire people filled with life, but it only ignited more compassion and more insistence on peace and more dedication to love. We obviously still have more work to do, and we owe it to those teenagers and to the youth ever since. We owe it to all generations. We owe it to the author of life, who for whatever reason beyond comprehension, continues to extend grace and mercy and forgiveness to set us free to learn and grow and further bring God's everlasting joy to for all to experience in whatever path they take. That all may know the Gospel that will never be taken away from us: "Out of the flames of human hate come the ashes of death. Out of the flame of God's love comes the promise for life." And for that Greatest News of all for Alfred Tibor, for those teenagers, for all of us, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!