

Reformation Sunday, October 28, 2018
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Olly-Olly-Ox-In-Free

A few weeks ago when Tami and I were in Amsterdam, we visited the Anne Frank House and explored “the secret annex” where Anne and her family and four other Jews hid from the Nazis for more than two years, until their whereabouts were betrayed and they were sent off to concentration camps, from which only Anne’s father returned alive.

Yesterday’s shootings at a Pittsburgh synagogue remind us that seventy-five years after the Franks were forced into hiding, the deadly sin of anti-Semitism continues to poison the souls of those who hate, and claim the lives of those who are hated. In 1994, the ELCA adopted “A Declaration to the Jewish Community.” That declaration reads in part, “We recognize in anti-Semitism a contradiction and affront to the Gospel, a violation of our hope and calling, and we pledge this church to oppose the deadly working of such bigotry, both within our own circles and in the society around us.” Our Presiding Bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, yesterday called us to reach out to those whose hearts are most broken by this latest act – our Jewish neighbors. It is a call your pastors echo and repeat. We simply must stand in solidarity with those whose faith makes them the targets of diseased minds and deadly hatred.

Our visit to the Anne Frank House called to mind a novel I had read in college: Kurt Vonnegut’s *Mother Night*. That book is about a fugitive who was being hunted, hounded and pursued for war crimes he had never committed. The problem was: everyone was certain that he had. At one point in the novel, the protagonist says this to the reader:

I disappeared from Germany at the end of the Second World War. I reappeared, unrecognized, in Greenwich Village. There I rented a depressing attic apartment with rats squeaking and scrabbling in the walls. I continued to inhabit that attic until a month ago, when I was brought to Israel for trial.

There was one pleasant thing about my ratty attic: the back window of it overlooked a little private park, a little Eden formed by joined back yards. That park, that Eden, was walled off from the streets by houses on all sides.

It was big enough for children to play hide-and-peek in.

I often heard a cry from that little Eden, a child’s cry that never failed to make me stop and listen. It was the sweetly mournful cry that meant that a game of hide-and-peek was over, that those still in hiding were to come out of hiding, that it was time to go home.

The cry was this: “Olly-olly-ox-in-free.”

And I, hiding from many people who might want to hurt or kill me, often longed for someone to give that cry for me, to end my endless game of hide-and-peek with a sweet and mournful – “Olly-olly-ox-in-free.”

Vonnegut has given poetic expression to the plight of many.

Hide. Seek. Either way you are not “home free” by the rules of the game. You are unfree, and both unfreedoms you know very well.

You are unfree when you feel you have something to hide – from God or from others. Some incident in the past or in the present; some attribute of your identity, some feeling of anger which has led to resentment which has led to guilt which feeds the anger and so on and on in an ever-escalating emotional spiral.

Some feeling of unworthiness. Some intemperate appetite or addiction, some behavior you vow a hundred times a day to change, but you can’t or you won’t but in any case you don’t.

Some unresolved conflict with another that you are afraid to express openly and instead express in hidden, devious ways. The very fact that you need to hide something is evidence of your unfreedom.

There is another kind of hiding: the hiding that says, “Not now, God. I can’t commit myself now. I have too many other obligations, too many other demands on my time and resources. Wait till I get this project out of the way. Wait till my kids are grown. Wait till I’m not so stressed out all the time. Wait, wait, wait.”

Or the kind of hiding that says, “Not even God can forgive what I did. Not even God can love the likes of me.” In every case, you are unfree. This unfreedom you know too well.

So also did Martin Luther. He played a game of hide-and-seek with God *par excellence*. He hid from the dreaded wrath of God, from the angry, righteous, vengeful God he read about in the Scriptures. He sought an accepting, forgiving, loving God, but failed to find one. So he tried to make himself acceptable to the perfectly righteous God by hiding once again, this time from the world, from its evils and temptations. He hid among the Augustinians, the Marine Corps of the monastic orders of the Middle Ages. But nowhere did he hear anyone issue that sweet and mournful cry he so longed to hear: “Olly-olly-ox-in-free.”

Israel also knew both unfreedoms well. For they had entered into a covenant with God when God took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt. It was a covenant of loyalty to God, and Jeremiah reminds us that it was a covenant they repeatedly broke: By the unfortunate politics of Jeremiah’s time, by the idolatry of the whole period of the Kings, already in the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

And what about us? When did we break it? At the very beginning in that godly playground called Eden? The first time we put our wants and desires ahead of our neighbors’ needs? This morning, when we greeted God’s new day with a sour word? All of the above?

In any event – the covenant lies shattered, and by its provisions, we are cursed with unfreedom: consigned to an eternal game of hide and seek with God and with each other. But listen. Jeremiah has more to say:

[T]his is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

What is this beautiful promise Jeremiah speaks? It is the surprising word that God will end our endless game of hide-and-seek. That those still seeking a hidden God need to seek no more. Jeremiah is the child of God who announces the Lord's call to the rest of God's children. And the cry is this: Olly-olly-ox-in-free.

Jeremiah envisions a new covenant, not like the old, but something entirely different. Note the one who takes the initiative in this new covenant: The Lord says, "I will make, I will put, I will write, I will be, I will forgive, I will remember no more." The One who alone can do so will forget the sin of the past and do a new work; a work whose call will be this: "Olly-olly-ox-in-free."

But Jeremiah's promise is just that, a promise – a word about the future. When will it be fulfilled? When will God cut this new covenant and do these promised things? "In the same way also, after supper, he took the cup, gave thanks and gave it to them to drink, saying, 'This cup is *the new covenant* in my blood which is poured out for you and for all *for the forgiveness of sins.*'"

Something has happened since Jeremiah announced God's remarkable promise, and that is the intervening life, death and resurrection of Jesus to which the Reformation of the 16th Century renewed a more intense attention.

Today, Kylie Jo is baptized into that covenant relationship, and seven youth will soon affirm the covenant God made with them in their own baptisms. Both occasions provide us all an opportunity for us to renew our commitment as God's covenant people.

When, by the Spirit's indwelling in our hearts, your will and my will are at last conformed to the one will of God for all, then we will discover that it is the suffering and loving heart of the crucified to which our hearts are molded.

We will then see that God does not hide from us, but is revealed to us precisely in our neighbors in need – in hurricane survivors in North Carolina, Virginia and Florida; in tsunami victims in Indonesia; in Central American refugees seeking escape from rape, death threats and gang violence in their own countries.

We need not hide from God, for God has sent heaven's Child into earth's playground: God's own Son, who will make it Eden once again, when at last we hear and hearken to his call:

"Olly-olly-ox-in-free."