

Rabbi Laurie Coskey,Ed.D

Rabbi in Residence

St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral

Eventide, November 18, 2007

Thank you Revs. Richardson and Thomas! What a meaningful afternoon and beautiful prayerful service....

Years ago I was teaching an adult education class and I chose as our text a beautiful book, In God's Mirror, (KTAV Publishing House 1990) by one of the preeminent rabbis of our time, Rabbi Harold Schulweis.

In an essay titled Letting Go/Holding On, Rabbi Schulweis frames the meaning of the Holocaust in the lives of Jewish women and men today. I want to share it with you because in a few short sentences, if you are not Jewish you will be able to grasp its impact on our day to day lives.

"The Holocaust is the dominant psychic reality in our lives. It lies hidden in our hoarse conversations with our children about mixed marriage, in our arguments over the low fertility rate of Jews, in our debates over support of the State of Israel, in our appeals for Jewish unity, in our fundraising – whatever the Jewish Cause. The Holocaust shapes our stance towards the world and our self understanding. It clings to our skin and penetrates beneath our skin, motivating our agenda and our policies. How could it be otherwise? Who could expect that a people that lost two out of every five of its members –40 percent of its community – should emerge unscathed, unscarred , fully normal?"

That's who we are, scarred and bruised – "a battered people still working out the shock of abandonment, resentment and disillusionment – still working out our grief, still in mourning. " And those of us who are rabbis teachers, often parents ourselves are trusted with the holy task of guiding our people, our families through the journey of holding on and letting go.

We are enjoined not to learn the wrong messages from the Holocaust, messages of hatred -- false and dangerous interpretations that divide the world into "them" and "us". We have to be mindful that "the polarization of humanity is not the wise and revenant exercise of Jewish memory."

We owe the memories of those that have perished and those that have come after more than a paralyzing cynicism or a legacy of isolation and distrust. We owe them the legacy that marks our great tradition : “that human beings are created in the divine image; that human beings are potentially good; that the prophetic faith in the possibility of a brighter future enables us to break free from the seething angers and anxieties.”

For us that means remembering it all including the thousands and thousands of righteous gentiles, as they have come to be known, who risked their lives and the lives of their families, and lost their possessions, to hide, protect, feed Jews. The precious persons, story after story of rescuers.

I am sure that you have heard of path of righteous gentiles at the holocaust museum in Jerusalem. Their stories too have been meticulously documented. Goodness must not be trivialized. Our Jewish people possess sacred testimony, a double memory of the worst and the best; the memory of indescribably evil and the memory of the precious human capacity to do good.

We Jews are not alone in this dual legacy. My challenge as a rabbi and a mother is to share that legacy, both sides because it is our duty not to teach hate. It is our duty to answer the call to goodness.

It is that capacity to do good to which we should aspire every day of our lives. Sometimes, that requires little from us other than to be present in our lives, to open our eyes and our hearts to the need around us. Sometimes that capacity to do good weighs heavily upon us as we confront a world filled with hate and evil – a world open to holocausts, ethnic cleansings and hate mongering. Sadly, that is the world that faces us today.

You all didn't have to go very far to find that out this week. On Friday afternoon minutemen stood outside your sanctuary with their video cameras and hate speech rolling. Assembly member Lori Saldana convened a group of faith and community leaders to create a response to the hate speech, particularly directed toward latino immigrants, that has become increasingly common in our print and electronic media.

The minutemen are emboldened KKK members so brazen they have no need to cover up their identities with cloaks or costumes. Their hateful rhetoric of blame and scapegoating recalls the persecution of African Americans in our country, Jews in Europe, and so many other ethnic or cultural minorities who are held responsible for the ills of society by ignorant and foolish people.

Just two weeks ago some of my colleagues, my husband, and I participated in a religious witness to the minuteman activities. On this Saturday, they were rifling through one of the

migrant workers encampments in the Penasquitos area, about 20 minutes from here. It happens that the encampment lays a few hundred yards from million dollar homes. Some of the neighbors there provide food and assistance to the migrant workers, mostly farmers.

One of the neighbors assisting is a man named Tim. He tries to go into the canyon and assist with trash pick up and removal. He is an executive at QUALCOMM and is working hard to find ways in which the migrant workers can improve their living conditions. For those of you who haven't seen the minutemen in action it's really something. They come into your personal space with video cameras and narrate their hate films by calling you names, mocking you while filming a close up of you.

Tim caught their attention so they followed him back to his house. A while later as he was packing his young family into the car, the minutemen accosted them. With two toddlers strapped into the minivan and his wife settling the baby into the car seat, they started to scream at the family – Wetback lovers they screamed. We hope that your children are raped and your house burns down.

The wife turned ashen. We could see that she was shaking. With restraint, they got into the car and drove away. We too were trembling from witnessing such a venomous display of hate.

Friends, they are no different than the Nazis or the Klan and they live among us. Indeed the assemblywoman is correct to call the leadership of our faith and justice organizations to respond to the hate speech filling our print and electronic airwaves. But if the experience of good and evil from the days of the holocaust can have any redemptive value it is that we are all called, every one of us to revile hate wherever it rears its ugly head. I invite each of you, every one of you to participate in religious witness against hate mongering. I invite you to be hissed at and called names like "humanitarian", and "immigrant lover." I invite you to stand in solidarity with those who are reviled, today it is the immigrant, tomorrow, who know, it might be us. Let us become righteous gentiles, righteous human beings. Yes, for these sake of those who have perished and also for the sake of our children and grandchildren.