

The Grossmunster Ambush

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Hyattsville Mennonite Church

Psalm 36: 5-10
Isaiah 62: 1-5
Luke 3: 7-14
James 2: 17-26

It was the second Sunday of our cross cultural semester in Europe, and our students were anxious to experience everything they could within the confines of one semester, so they asked if we, as a group, could worship at the Grossmunster Cathedral in Zurich. I was thrilled to get this request, and immediately checked the train schedules and arranged for an early breakfast so that we could get to Zurich by 10:00 a.m. After the worship service, we planned to eat our sack lunches on the banks of the Limmat river, and then listen to a paper, read by one of our students, on the subject of Heinrich Bullinger.

We were welcomed at the door of the church and, not wishing to unduly call attention to ourselves as a group of foreign visitors, we dutifully found our seats near the back of the huge cathedral. The worship service was, as I expected it to be, a very formal, traditional protestant worship service. I took note of the fact that the preacher of the morning, a petite woman in early middle age, would, I thought, look a lot less than imposing when standing in the great pulpit from which the likes of Huldrich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger had thundered their revolutionary calls for the reformation of the church.

Her name is Kathi La Roche. She is the successor to both Heinrich Bullinger and Huldrich Zwingli at the Grossmunster Cathedral. I was quietly amused by the fact that any woman could be the successor to either of these two giants, and I remember thinking that there must be some hope for these Europeans if they can accept a woman's leadership in a prestigious place like the Grossmunster Cathedral.

I should have been warned by the title of her sermon, "Nicht auf die Gesinnung, sondern aufs Tun kommt es an." (Which roughly translated, means: "It is not in the intending, but in acting that it happens.") But alas, I was blind to the collision of history that was about to happen.

She opened her sermon with a story from Berthold Brecht, which goes like this: "Someone asked Mr. K if there is a God. And Mr. K. said 'I suggest that you ask yourself if your answer to that question could ever change. And if it could never change, you might as well not ask the question in the first place.

However, if you are open to a change in the way you answer the question, then I can at least be helpful to you in that I can say to you that you have already decided, just by asking the question, that you have a need for God.”

Hmm, I thought, as I settled myself back into the pew, now we will have a very nice, very intellectual, very European discourse on the “God question.”

But Frau La Roche immediately launched into an uncompromising indictment of the church for completely and totally missing the point when it comes to this thing we call “The God Question.” Too easily we have assumed, she said, that we can consider this question in the comfort and safety of our homes and churches where we do not need to worry about the lack of food, clothing and shelter the way others have to worry about such things. We are under the greatest illusion in history if we think that our ruminations on the existence of God can be done in such safety, simply because the existence of God is shown and proved by our feeding the hungry and clothing the naked of this world. If we are not actively involved in the work of relieving suffering, and if we are absent from the efforts toward peace and justice in the human family, we are telling the world that there is no God because, as the book of James says, “Faith without works is dead.”

Then came another story from Martin Buber, the famous Jewish philosopher. A man came home late one Friday night from his visit to the synagogue. His wife asked him “What great question have you solved, now that you came home so late?” He answered, “We had a great discussion about all the poor people who live around us, and how recently there has not been food for them and how the price of fuel has gone up so high that they cannot keep themselves warm, and we wondered how are they going to celebrate the coming holidays without flour and without wine.” The wife said, “And what did the preacher say about this?” The man answered “He said that the poor have every right to take what they need from the rich. We decided that this is half of the answer to the problem. The poor have the right to what they need.” The woman asked “What is the other half of the problem?” “The other half of the problem,” said the man, “is whether the rich are obligated to give anything to the poor, and on that half of the question, we decided that we have to wait for the answer, because we don’t know.”

Frau La Roche’s sermon continued. It was an uncompromising statement on how clearly the Bible teaches that we do know about the other half of the problem. We know all too clearly what the Bible teaches about ethical conduct. And we also know clearly how the church has historically diverted its energies into theological discussions instead of works of justice and peacemaking. She indicted the Roman Catholic church, the Lutheran reformers as well as her own Reformed Church predecessors. Her sermon was, in short, a manifesto that could be called unflinchingly “Anabaptist.” I felt that it was probably the most “Anabaptist” sermon I had ever heard. I had trouble believing what I was hearing, so I asked Frau La Roche for a copy of her sermon, which she willingly handed me. When I studied it at

home, I discovered that her sermon was even more “radical” than I had suspected just from hearing it spoken in her ornately expressed German.

There was yet more to come on that day in Zurich. Our student, Caroline Minninger, had prepared a paper on Heinrich Bullinger, whose statue graces the entry to the Grossmunster Cathedral. Bullinger was the immediate successor to Huldreich Zwingli, whose statue stands on the other side of the cathedral, on the banks of the Limmat river. Zwingli, of course, was the Swiss reformer who started it all in Zurich, when he broke away from the Roman Catholic church and became the leader of the Swiss reformation. After Zwingli was killed in the battle of Kappel where the Swiss fought against the pope’s army, Heinrich Bullinger became his successor at Grossmunster. Like Zwingli, Bullinger thought that the Anabaptists, who had broken away from Zwingli because they thought Zwingli was not radical enough in his reforms, were a dangerous bunch of people. Bullinger pursued them relentlessly and made sure they got death sentences handed to them. He was present at their drownings in the Limmat river, riding out in the boat with them and supervising the tying of their hands and feet before they were thrown in the water. But Bullinger showed a strong pastoral commitment in the way he participated in such activities. On the way to the drownings, he prayed, read scripture, and tried to get the Anabaptists to recant.

I had become familiar with this man’s history because I had attended an exhibition on Heinrich Bullinger, which had been put on at the Grossmunster Cathedral two years ago. I was particularly interested in how this man’s vendetta against the Anabaptists would be described. And sure enough, there it was, fully documented in one part of the exhibit. I could not believe how forthrightly his obsession over the Anabaptists was recounted, so I lingered there and observed how other people attending the exhibit would react. A group of women came along and read the descriptions in the booth that dealt with the Anabaptists. The shocked expressions on their faces is something I will never forget. They walked away muttering “Dies ist aber schrecklich.” (This is horrible.) The next day I hurried over to my friend’s office at the Bienenberg Mennonite Bible School where we were staying. Hans Peter Jecker is a convert to the Mennonite faith, and he has become the leading Mennonite historian in Europe, if not the world. I burst into his office and informed him on what I had witnessed the day before at the Heinrich Bullinger exhibit. “You won’t believe what the exhibit says about how cruel Bullinger was in his treatment of the Anabaptists,” I said. “Oh yes I would,” he replied. “I wrote it.”

The collision of history that I experienced on September 10, 2006 in the Grossmunster Cathedral came from knowing how relentlessly Heinrich Bullinger, the predecessor of Kathi La Roche, had pursued my spiritual ancestors. Bullinger considered the Anabaptists especially dangerous because they practiced what they preached. He wrote at least six books in which he indicted them for doing good works. He wrote that these Anabaptists were especially dangerous because they were so good. He thought they were

wrong in believing that no one should be put to death for erring in his faith. He wrote that the Anabaptists were totally misguided in thinking that the sword should not be used to bring people to the right belief and that the secular kingdom should be separated from the church. He wrote that they were wrong in teaching that the gospel must simply be preached and that the sword should not be employed to force anyone to accept the gospel. He wrote, blaming them for teaching that the church suffers and endures persecution but does not inflict persecution upon anyone else. They are wrong, he said, in teaching such things. He often went after people who, by their upright lives and absence of hate and violence, and in some cases by their refusal to commit adultery and use cuss words, proved themselves to be Anabaptists.

In other words, the Anabaptists were doing the very things that Kathi La Roche was calling upon the church to do. They were showing by their actions, not their preachments, that they believed in God. To borrow a phrase that was recently attributed to the late President Gerald Ford, who said "If Abraham Lincoln were alive today, he'd be spinning in his grave." The same could have been said on September 10, 2006 if Heinrich Bullinger had been in attendance at the Grossmunster Cathedral. He would have been spinning in his grave. Bullinger would not be able to fathom how his successor, who lives in the same house he lived in for forty-three years, could say the things she said.

Just in case you haven't caught my drift, I would like to close by saying that the reason I have recounted for you the collision of history that I experienced in the Grossmunster Cathedral is that for me, this is a story of hope. Yes, I realize that I am talking about a five hundred year gap between Heinrich Bullinger and Kathi La Roche, but folks, people of faith are willing to wait, and sometimes they have to wait a long time. Every year we go through the season of Advent, in which we remind ourselves time and again that we are still waiting for the birth of Jesus among us, even as we celebrate the birth of Jesus that has already happened. Sometimes it takes an ambush like I experienced in the cathedral, when five hundred years of history were simply smushed together into several hours. Kathi La Roche's sermon was a whammy, but Caroline Minninger's paper was a double whammy, and I got a lot of cynicism and hopelessness knocked out of my system that morning. Amen.