



When I was at seminary and I had to walk across the street to get to my car, I always had to walk past the statue that's shown on the front cover of your bulletin this morning. The sculpture is called, "Promise for Life," and it was crafted by a man named Alfred Tibor, but, at birth, he was given the name Alfred Arthur Goldstein. He, along with millions in Europe, were born at the exact wrong place at the exact wrong time.

Alfred grew up in Hungary when his nightmare began: when the Nazis took over. Soon enough he would be taken into a forced-labor camp while his parents died at Auschwitz.

Actually, he and his brother, Andrew, would be the only family to survive at all. Over eighty of their relatives died in the Holocaust, including their brother, Tibor, which is why the surviving brothers made the decision to change their last name to honor the one they lost. It didn't end with the Nazis for Alfred, though. He would be captured by the Soviets and shipped to a gulag for an additional four years of a horrifying nightmare. After he returned to Hungary for a short time amidst a failed uprising in his home country, he eventually immigrated to the United States alongside his wife and two children, not to mention along with the precious hopes and dreams to become an artist.

In due time, Alfred Tibor constructed more than five hundred sculptures, including 17 around Columbus, Ohio, where I went to seminary. Now you may not be able to see his masterpiece in the seminary courtyard quite so well in the picture, but at the bottom there is a group of people surrounded by barbed-wire with one falling to the

ground and another lying dead underneath. And yet, behind them, there is this flame reaching 27 feet above, revealing a family reunited in joy. What you cannot see in the picture is the collection of words inscribed at the base of the sculpture: “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.” In spite of enduring the most horrifying nightmare any human being can imagine, Alfred Tibor managed to proclaim a hope, the only hope that can triumph over any hatred our humanity can unleash on each other.

I bring this up because of the line that can be so easily overlooked in the Gospel this morning: “that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations.” Now we recognize we all need forgiveness. We often take time during worship to do exactly that: to consider the wrongs we have done to God, to each other, even to our very soul. We confess them, knowing that God loves us and will not only offer forgiveness, but unleash it upon us. Except the whole *repentance* thing is something we Lutherans, and plenty of other Christians, completely look over. That’s, obviously, reserved for the

Catholics. That's for the priest in his confession box to tell the sinner how many "Hail Mary's" they have to say in order to make things right with God.

However, that Promise for Life sculpture, for me, was not just an absolutely beautiful work of art to be able to walk by on a frequent basis. It was also a painful reminder of a downright hideous past for us Lutherans. Granted, we have made significant strides in radical hospitality over the years. We not only allow, but encourage women to be leaders in the church, to the point of our *female* Presiding Bishop of the entire ELCA. We also welcome all the baptized, regardless of church affiliation, to be part of the Holy Communion meal that we believe is set on the table for everyone, no questions asked. But then, we still have this past that reveals a gut-wrenching history: not just with Lutheran churches in Germany that said nothing in the face of a mass extermination, but with Martin Luther himself, who wrote, "Set fire to their synagogues or schools." Jewish houses should "be razed and destroyed." In addition, "their rabbis [should] be forbidden to teach on

pain of loss of life and limb.” And, if that wasn’t enough, “all cash and treasure of silver and gold [should] be taken from them.”

I understand none of us wrote those words. None of us were part of the Lutheran church in Germany. But I go back to that sculpture: surrounding it on the ground are bricks with the one-word inscription, “Remember,” in languages from all over the world. We not only remember the hideous history of centuries past. We remember the times when *we* were silent too: when we should have said something to stop embarrassing behavior that affected others, even just for one life, one life that God cherishes just as much as our own. We not only confess the times when we did something wrong. We also confess the times when we did nothing at all.

Nevertheless, the sculpture along with Scripture along with the cross and the empty tomb: none of it is meant to make us feel so incredibly guilty that it makes us cower in fear from attempting to move forward at all. We’re meant to be caught up in the flame of God’s love that brings about life. We’re meant to be caught up in the life of repentance, to realize just how powerful this Resurrection is: to set us

free from the sin that can no longer define us. To be caught up in opportunities galore to bring that very love of God to life.

Alfred Tibor died just over a year ago, a life-long journey with God on this earth that lasted 97 years altogether. His message, his hope, his love, in the face of the most disgusting hatred our humanity is capable of; that love continues to live on, soaring as high as that flame in his sculpture, and then some. We remember not just our sin. We remember the grace, the mercy, the freedom that God unleashes upon us to move forward together for the sake of all of God's children near and far. The Resurrection has more than lifted us up into a new life that no work of art can ever come close to describing. And for that, we most certainly give thanks to God indeed! Amen.