

WORDS FROM THE BISHOP: “REMEMBER THE SABBATH, AND KEEP IT HOLY.”

On Saturday, a gunman interrupted worship at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. Eleven people were killed, and six were injured. But the destruction goes beyond that house of worship, beyond Pittsburgh. The world is in mourning, and Jewish communities are questioning whether they can ever feel safe. The response to the massacre was worldwide-- mourning the dead, and lamenting the increasing instances both of anti-Semitic atrocities and of mass shootings in houses of worship.

In the United States in the last few years there have been too many shootings in houses of worship. Think Charleston—Mother Emanuel AME. Think Knoxville—Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist. Think Oak Creek—a Sikh temple. Think Sutherland Springs—First Baptist. And now Pittsburgh—Tree of Life Synagogue. Violation of the sacred space of worship is particularly heinous. It transgresses all decency. All public and private spaces should be immune from violence. Historically, places of worship have been, by definition, sanctuaries, safe places.

The anti-Semitism espoused by the alleged killer in Pittsburgh is completely unacceptable under any circumstances. Jews have been the victims of anti-Semitism for too long. For centuries, Jews were oppressed in Europe, under Christian rulers, faring much better under Muslim rulers who were far more tolerant. “Christian” anti-Semitism came to a peak under Nazi Germany, when Hitler and his followers attempted to exterminate all the Jews in Europe.

Post World War II, as the facts about the Holocaust came out, both secular and religious leaders made attempts to address the anti-Semitism that was at the root of the unthinkable attempt to exterminate a whole people. Nations passed laws, and religious groups, having discovered that some of their teachings were used to justify anti-Semitism, made declarations of support for the Jewish community worldwide, and repudiated any past declarations that were derogatory towards Jews.

Montana has not been immune to anti-Semitism. In the 1990’s, acts of anti-Semitism led to the overwhelming community response, led by the churches, “Not in Our Town.” More recently in the Flathead, there was an organized campaign of harassment of Jews, which was, again, opposed by an interfaith coalition, including Lutherans.

The ELCA apologized for past bigotry and harm in a 1994 Declaration, saying: “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.” Along with the Lutheran World Federation, our church has repudiated the many unfortunate anti-Semitic statements made by Martin Luther. Clearly, those statements have been part of the problem.

In 1995, the Montana Synod entered into an historic agreement with the Montana Association of Jewish Communities (MAJCO), pledging common support, prayer and solidarity. We re-affirmed the agreement in 2015. You can find it on our web site. As I wrote to the various Jewish communities across the state this week, expressing condolences and support, I made reference to our agreement from 1995. And I also promised that you, the people of the Montana Synod, were in this with me, that you would pray for and stand with your Jewish neighbors in this difficult time for them. We are in this for the long haul.

Regardless of your religious orientation, anti-Semitism is never acceptable, and violence is never acceptable. Because of increasing acts of anti-Semitism both in our country and abroad, many Jewish communities are feeling vulnerable. It is not enough to wring our hands and wish it would go away. Resisting anti-Semitism and other kinds of bigotry is needed, now more than ever. Please show your solidarity with your Jewish neighbors, by letting them know that you stand with them, and will not tolerate their rights and their safety being threatened by anyone.

For those of us who are religious, it is a religious imperative. And for all of us, religious or not, it is a civic imperative, enshrined in the Bill of Rights.

Bishop Jessica Crist

