

World War I Stories and Christian Peoplehood. Sermon for Rainbow Church, KC, October 29, 2017, and Lorraine Avenue Church, November 12, 2017.

Bible Text: Deuteronomy 26: 5-10

I. God's revelation in story.

We know through stories who we are as people of God. The Bible is a record of stories. In Deuteronomy 26 we read one of the oldest story accounts: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien . . . When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us . . . the Lord heard our voice. . . . The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm . . . and he brought us into this place and gave us this land a land flowing with milk and honey." The Exodus story is one of the most profound stories in the Bible and in all human history.

Fifty years ago, in 1967, when I began work on my Ph.D. dissertation on the history of Mennonites in Kansas, I stepped in to a stream of American Mennonite stories from the Great War of 1917. It is now the centennial of American entry into that war. Last weekend at the World War I symposium about the opponents of that war, we heard dozens of stories of people of peace who were sorely afflicted and then rescued by the Lord's mighty hand and outstretched arm.

We will take time this morning for just four of these stories about our people in Kansas.

II. Story One: Coopriders at West Liberty Walter Coopriders was the son of an American Civil War veteran who married a Mennonite widow. During the Great War they were members of the West Liberty (Old) Mennonite Church in McPherson County. Walter had one conscripted son at Camp Funston, and two sons at home. He refused to buy war bonds. Most Kansas Mennonites bought bonds, in some cases following Elder P. H. Richert's advice to buy under protest. In theory the purchase of war bonds was voluntary. But that was just in theory.

The hysterical anti-German war spirit extended to McPherson, Kansas. On the night of April 22, 1918 a mob from McPherson went to the Coopriders home several miles south and west of the city. They cut the telephone wires so no one could call out. They called Mr. Coopriders out of the house and gave him one last chance to buy bonds.

Walter again refused to buy bonds. The mobsters told him to get into a sheet to be tarred and feathered. His son, George, who had been watching from an upstairs window, ran out into the yard and asked if he could take his father's place, because Walter had not been in good health. The mob leaders consulted with each other and then agreed. They took off George's clothes, put him onto the sheet, and rolled him around in the tar and feathers.

I first learned this story one Sunday morning in 1967 when my wife, Anna, and I had attended the West Liberty Mennonite Church, and the Coopriders had invited us for Sunday dinner. Mrs. Coopriders and Anna were in the kitchen while her husband was telling this story

to me in the living room. Mrs. Cooprider said she wished that he wouldn't talk about the story because it always made him upset. But Walter was convinced that God had brought a young historian to the West Liberty Church. He believed God had prompted him to invite the historian to their home, because it was important for the next generation to know about what had happened in 1917-1918.

So here I am this morning, fulfilling a providential mission. In fact, much of my scholarly research has focused on World War I. J. Harold Moyer of the Bethel College music faculty and I collaborated on a musical drama with a plot that had a Mennonite young man taking his father's place when a violent mob came. Walter Cooprider died long ago. But the story lives on. The Christian gospel of peace is preserved in stories.

III. Story Two: Dieners at Spring Valley. In April 1918 a similar story unfolded for the Diener family south of Canton in McPherson County. Charles Diener and his father, D. A. Diener, had refused to buy war bonds. Earlier that day someone had nailed an American flag to the Spring Valley Mennonite Church. Diener admitted that he had taken it down. The mob tarred and feathered Charles Diener, went to the church and put tar on the door and steps, and then drove to the home of his father, D. A. Diener, called him out of bed (at 2:30 a.m.) and tarred and feathered him as well.

A few weeks later, the mob went back to the Diener home. They convinced pastor Diener to write out a check for \$50 to the American Red Cross. The mob left. The next day pastor Diener went to town, stopped payment on the check, but agreed to pay \$75 for the Friends Reconstruction Service.

On June 3 the mob from Canton came to the Dieners a third time. As pastor Diener later described it, "They ransacked the house from cellar to garret. . . . They daubed my new house with paint, inside and out, and did the same to the automobile. They tore off my underwear, struck me a dozen times or more with a large strap, bruising my flesh and cutting the skin open. I was dragged to the barn and abused, after which they applied carboline roofing paint to my body followed by feathers. The carbolic acid in the paint made me very sore, and my body, face, and hands were badly swollen. I was left with the threat that they would hang me the next time."

The Cooprider and Diener stories did not end heroically. Faced with credible threats of execution, Walter Cooprider and D. A. Diener eventually went to McPherson and to Canton and made token purchases of war bonds. Was their decision preferable to that of the Hutterite Hofer brothers whose absolute and uncompromising resistance resulted in their deaths at Fort Leavenworth? When is death better than compromise?

IV. Story Three: Harders at Emmaus. That same spring season in Butler County pastor Bernard W. Harder was visited by a mob in broad daylight. The mob came from the town of Whitewater, four miles southwest of the Harder farm. Harder was pastor of the Emmaus (GC) Mennonite Church, where the worship services were in the German language. He had showed

his German cultural sympathies by naming his sons after the great German writers, Schiller and Goethe: John Schiller Harder and Bernhard Goethe Harder.

There had been a patriotic rally at Whitewater. A high school girl gave a patriotic reading that ridiculed the peace-minded woman who wrote the popular song, "I Didn't Raise My Boy to be a Soldier." As the rally was dying down, someone there said that the German farmers out in the country were not willing to fly the American flag. Bernhard W. Harder and his son were fixing the roof on the henhouse when they saw the line of cars coming to their farm from Whitewater "like funeral procession over the hill."

When the mob met Harder on the farmyard they asked why he didn't fly the American flag. He said he had nothing against the flag. He allowed them to nail up a flag on his front porch. When that didn't seem to satisfy the mob, Rev. Harder stood on the porch and said, "Since we are all good Americans here, let's all sing 'America.'" With a big voice he led out, "Oh beautiful, for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain. . . ." He knew all four verses of that song because he had used it in the parochial school at the Emmaus Church where he was a teacher. The crowd had no choice but to sing along—as far as they knew the words. But Harder continued to sing all four verses. By the end he was singing all alone. The mob had been out-Americanized by a Mennonite pastor. They got into their cars and left. They drove to the home of Rev. Gustav Harder, minister and elder of the Emmaus Church. It turned out that Elder Harder also had no objection to flying the flag, so the mob went back to Whitewater.

In the weeks after the mob action, German-speaking Mennonites did not come to Whitewater to do their shopping. So some of the more level-headed leaders in town called for another public meeting and invited Mennonites to come. They invited a speaker from Wichita to come and talk about true patriotism. He called the citizens to build up the community and not to tear it down.

V. Story Four: Schrag at Burrton. Perhaps the most dramatic incident of mob violence in Kansas took place in Burrton in Harvey County on November 11, 1918—Armistice Day. The citizens of Burrton had a victory celebration in town, and decided to round up the slackers who had not bought war bonds. John Schrag of the Hopefield Mennonite Church lived eleven miles out in the country—on the northern side of what is now Harvey County Park. The Burton patriots drove out to the Schrag home, took him into town, and gave him one last chance to buy bonds. He refused. They demanded that he lead a parade down Main Street. They thrust an American flag into his hand. He did not take hold of the flag and it fell the ground. Someone shouted, "He stepped on the American flag."

The crowd became a raging mob. Someone ran to a hardware store and got some yellow paint and a rope to hang him on a nearby tree. They beat him and smeared the paint onto his face and beard. He didn't offer any resistance. They were about to hang him when Tom Roberts, the head of the local Anti-Horse Thief Association, interfered with his gun. "This is America, a place of law and order," said Roberts. "You won't hang this man without a trial except over my dead body." Roberts got Schrag into a little jail on Main Street, had someone call the county

sheriff in Newton to come and get Schrag, and stood in front of jail with his gun. He allowed people to go to the barred window and spit on Schrag. Some mobsters made plans to come back at night and break into the jail and hang him. But the authorities took him to Newton for cleaning up, and then to Wichita for the night.

Less than a month later the Burrton citizens brought a legal case against Schrag before a judge in Wichita for him to be bound over to trial for having violated the Espionage Act. Schrag hired a Jewish attorney for his defense in court. The judge decided in Schrag's favor. He had not willfully desecrated the flag. He had not said anything in English, and his accusers did not understand German, so their testimony that he had slandered the flag was not credible. Schrag's attorney encouraged him to sue the Burrton folks for violating his rights, but Schrag declined. Some Mennonites in the area stopped doing business in Burrton, and the town went into a postwar economic depression.

The Schrag mob incident had a remarkably redemptive aftermath. A young man from outside town, Charles Gordon, had arrived late to the event. He was impressed with the demeanor of John Schrag. Years later in our tape-recorded interview, Gordon said, "He never fought back, raised his voice, or resisted when smeared with yellow paint." Indeed, Gordon said he looked like the non-resistant Christ. A kind of halo appeared over his head. "Because of Schrag, I became a conscientious objector." "You mean you joined the Mennonite Church?" I asked. "No, I have been a member of the Assemblies of God. You don't have to be a Mennonite to believe in peace."

What do the stories of the Coopriider, Diener, Harder and Schrag families tell us about our Christian faith? Stories create community. They connect us to our roots and establish our identity. They teach us moral lessons. They inspire and renew us. The challenges we face today may be quite different from what our people encountered a hundred years ago. Nevertheless, some of the scholars at the symposium last weekend said that if America got into war today, the national war hysteria could rival that of 1917-1918. These stories can connect us to the salvation history we read in the Bible. May God help us remember the stories that keep us faithful as disciples of Christ.