

I don't live in Minneapolis anymore, so I won't be voting in the next school board elections. But as you're probably aware, there was a teacher's strike that was just resolved.

Strikes are nothing new, but one story from the strike I found a little disturbing (well more than a little) was how a member of the school board, Josh Pauley, resigned. I have no idea what his stances are on the issues. But what was disturbing was a group of teachers opted to protest at the man's house. Chants outside his home included "Fee-fi-fo-fum. Look out, Pauly, here we come." I'm not sure at what point it became acceptable to protest outside the homes of people, and were I parent wouldn't want a teacher doing this implying that this is somehow acceptable behavior, but here we are. Though he had been priorly endorsed by the teacher's union, I guess that all changed. And so the former teacher turned board member opted to cash in his chips understandably.

Needless to say, in recent years we've seen a drastic increase in terms of something that has always been a part of human nature: namely scapegoating, shouting, anger, and blaming others. This is but one example. There is the mob violence we've seen on TV at so-called

“peaceful protests” gone haywire, like the burning of the Minneapolis third precinct two years ago, or the violence against Civil Rights marchers from the 1960s. But there are always places where nastiness happens at small and larger levels. The gossip begins and spreads and leads to scapegoating or violence. The bully at school gains friends because they want to be with the bully or not be bullied themselves. The gossip at a school, a church, an office or a neighborhood leads to factions forming or people being ostracized. The poison words used for others around the kitchen table so a 7 year old has already learned all Democrats or Republicans are evil. In all of it, what you have are people getting caught up in something, but also a whole lot of people being silent. What if though, we were to do what Jesus does to the mob who brings the woman to him, and respond with love and mercy? Might we not only help someone, but give others pause to think too?

Friderich and Pauline Kellner were a couple who lived in Germany during the Second World War.

They were German citizens who had been through a lot by the time World War II began. But neither of them got caught up in the Nazi hysteria. In fact,

they tried to do what they could to talk some sanity into their neighbors, and during the war documented what happened around them through their diary.

“This imbecile has us especially close to his heart. He makes no secret of his hateful feelings. He does not greet my wife at all and ignores me unless it’s for official business,” wrote Friedrich Kellner, courthouse administrator in the small German town of Laubach, on January 23, 1943. The “imbecile” was Heinrich Scherdt, the court constable, who had been directed by the local SS unit, a branch of the Gestapo office in Giessen, to report on the Kellners.

Frederich had served in the Kaiser’s army, and was wounded in a muddy trench in France. They survived the Great War, but it seemed less likely they would survive this, their second war, resolved as they were to record Nazi crimes for posterity.

When the Great War ended, Pauline and Friedrich welcomed the dissolution of the monarchy and rise of the Republic. They formally withdrew from the Evangelical Lutheran Church because of their support

for the war. Friedrich became an organizer for the Social Democratic Party, and Pauline formed a political club with other young mothers.

For a decade things were stable. But the economic catastrophe of 1929 ultimately brought Adolf Hitler, with his promises to restore Germany's standing in Europe, to power. Even the Kellners' teenage son, Fred, clamored to join the Hitler Youth. "The youth have been contaminated through and through by the spirit of Hitler," Friedrich wrote. The cultured nation of Gutenberg, Schiller, Goethe, and Beethoven began its devolution into barbarism. The New Order was established, one without justice.

To avoid Hitler's revenge against those who had opposed him, the Kellners moved to the small town of Laubach in 1933, where Friedrich's position as courthouse manager included an apartment for them in the building.

Though no one knew of their political activities in Mainz, their refusal to join the local Nazi Party immediately put them under suspicion.

In 1935, just two years into the Third Reich, their son lost some of his enchantment with the Nazi agenda, specifically the mandatory work service for young men and conscription into the army. Fred agreed to emigrate to

America. Also that year, a Nazi rally in Nuremberg highlighted the mob mentality transforming Germany. Laws were passed that arbitrarily stripped German Jews of their citizenship and placed them under oppressive regulations. To abrogate the rights of people who had contributed over the centuries to Germany's development was "unworthy of a cultured nation," wrote Friedrich Kellner, "and the curse of this evil deed will indelibly rest upon the entire German people."

As worried Jews sought to leave Germany, a Jewish woman in Laubach, Hulda Heynemann, approached Pauline for help. The police had brought false charges against her son-in-law, Julius Abt, to confiscate his property. When Friedrich uncovered the truth, he and Pauline helped Abt get to the port in Hamburg to leave for America. The Heynemann's daughter, Lucie, expecting a child, remained behind until her child's birth. The Kellners helped mother and infant son get away as well. They tried to convince Lucie's parents to leave with her, but the Heynemann family had been in Laubach for generations, and the old couple felt certain their neighbors would do them no harm. They were certainly not mob people, but rather peaceful neighbors. But the Kellners had a sense for what was coming.

The Kellners' willingness to go against the general atmosphere of anti-Semitism did not come from any personal associations. They had no Jewish friends; they hardly knew any Jews, which was not unusual, considering less than 1% of Germany's population was Jewish. They simply believed all people were the same: there was no master race and no subhumans. They would not compromise that belief to curry favor in changing political circumstances or hateful ideologies. They were guided by a very simple but profound rule: The Golden Rule, from the Sermon on the Mount. "Do unto others, as you would have others do unto you." Friedrich noted how Christian leaders failed in this respect. "The Church in Germany does not take a position about the terrible atrocities committed against the Jews" he wrote.

The Heynemanns made a mistake trusting their neighbors. On the moonlit night of November 9, 1938, "Crystal Night," during an orchestrated nationwide frenzy of religious and racial hatred, Friedrich and Pauline Kellner tried vainly to halt the mob seeking to attack the town's Jews. The judge who presided over the court, Ludwig Schmitt, refused Friedrich's request to bring the Jewish families into the building for protection. Pauline had no better success with Frau Desch, the head of the Nazi women's

group, whose husband was a major Nazi figure. The Nazi stormtroopers were led by Albert Haas; he was a high school teacher. Rampaging with them were boys from the Hitler Youth, some in Haas's class. Jews were beaten, their homes ransacked. Furnishings, Torah scrolls, and prayer books from the synagogue were tossed onto a bonfire. Even the Jewish dead were assailed, their cemetery littered with smashed tombstones.

Friedrich wanted to press charges against the leaders of the stormtroopers, bringing his and Pauline's written testimony to Judge Schmitt. The judge angrily denounced him and said Frau Desch had demanded an investigation into Pauline's ancestry to see if she had Jews in her family—nothing else could explain why the wife of a justice official sent her son to America to avoid army service, did not cooperate with the Nazi women's group, and helped Jews. Friedrich provided documents proving of her ancestry and charges were dismissed, but, undeterred, Frau Desch made repeated attempts to intimidate Pauline. With leaders of the Nazi Women's League and the Women's Block Warden Group in tow, she brought admission forms to the Kellners' apartment in the courthouse, sternly telling Pauline to complete them. Wrote Frederick: "Despite their repeated efforts and intimidations, my wife never filled out a single form or became a

member of any such organization. I would suggest that in all of Germany there are to be found few wives of officials who showed the same courage. Yes, she is most definitely courageous. The reader will understand when I propose here that a monument should be erected to my brave wife.”

In the end, the Nazi women settled for ostracizing her, and the Laubach SS placed Pauline and Friedrich under surveillance. Friedrich’s position as a mid-level official provided some protection from arbitrary arrest, yet the couple tempted fate by adopting elements of active resistance: sharing news they secretly heard from BBC broadcasts and placing Allied airplane leaflets around town. They were well aware of the penalties for such actions; the newspapers were filled with stories of people being executed for listening to foreign broadcasts or distributing leaflets. With a touch of gallows humor, Friedrich pasted several of those news articles in his diary.

On the first day of war, September 1, 1939, when German troops invaded Poland, he began his diary in earnest. He would fill ten notebooks (nine hundred pages) by war’s end. The danger of his task was underscored early on. In 1940 he was called into the mayor’s office for questioning about his “uncooperative attitude.” While there, the block warden and one of the

group leaders searched his apartment. Had Pauline not managed to hide the diary notebook beneath her blouse and sweater, Friedrich would have been executed as a traitor. And Pauline, whose strength and moral integrity reinforced her husband's determination to give a true accounting of events, would have shared his fate.

As all Germany suffered, soon Nazi victories turned into retreats, and die-hard believers placed even more pressure on those they considered "defeatists." However, when Allied forces closed in on the Rhine, and Russian armies were in sight of Berlin, the Laubach townsfolk suddenly learned to nod cordially to the court administrator and his wife.

On March 29, 1945, U.S. Army troops ended the war early for the inhabitants of Laubach. Learning of Friedrich's opposition to the Third Reich, the officer of the small command that would occupy the town until the end of the year appointed him first town councilman and deputy mayor. Friedrich worked to remove the local Nazis from their positions. Then he and Pauline brought together former Social Democrats and new recruits to rebuild their party. The Laubach branch of the Social Democratic Party elected Friedrich their chairman.

In April 1946 the Kellners' son appeared in Laubach, wearing a U.S. Army uniform. He would have a son too, and for the last ten years remaining to Friedrich and Pauline Kellner, they worked with their grandson to school him in the diary with its clear distinctions between right and wrong. In 1970, after fifty-seven years of an eventful and consequential life together, Pauline and Friedrich Kellner died within months of each other. They were buried in their hometown of Mainz.

In 2011 the diary was published in Germany to wide acclaim. The mayor of Mainz designated their gravesite a Grave of Honor. And Laubach had a new street: Friedrich Kellner Strasse. And in 2018 Cambridge University Press published the English translation, ***My Opposition: The Diary of Friedrich Kellner – A German against the Third Reich.***

Inside all of us as humans can be this tendency to become part of a mob. We can scapegoat and tear one another down; we can use our religion to be divisive and push people out of the boat rather than be a fisher of men; and we can get caught up in polarization and anger. Now this is by no means to say we should not have passion. We are different, and there are things that are important to fight for, to stand up for. It's also important to

argue for our faith and what we believe in. So too is it fine to have passion for things like our political beliefs, or what direction we believe the Church universal and local should go, or for our neighborhood or school. But unfortunately sometimes these things can get out of control. And when things go wrong, we can look for people to blame (other than ourselves of course). And while it might be tempting to think well Nazism that's a thing of the past and we've learned from that, right? Well, not so much. The impacts of original sin remain. Just look at recent times. We as people continue to become encamped and scapegoat; political sides blaming one another; various groups blaming one another for the Covid situation that unfolded; whatever the issue, we as humans need to be honest that divisiveness is not something that is new. Rather, we need to be honest where it is in our hearts, root it out, and flip the script and meet people with love and mercy like the Kellners did.

The woman in this Gospel is the victim of a mob. We have a group of self-righteous scribes and Pharisees who bring the woman to Jesus, and we are told she was caught in the act of adultery.

Sometimes one of the things that can lead to scapegoating and targeting people is minding the business of others. Have you ever wondered how these people caught her in the act? Were they near her home? Looking through her window? Waiting in the bushes? Remember when we judge we want to will the good of the other; to help them (more on that in a moment). Sometimes we can focus on the lives of others and see their faults only to make ourselves feel better about ourselves, or to gossip and slander.

That's the second point: gossip and slander. It's how you go from a little fire to a forest fire. A few words here or there about what someone is doing or with whom they are doing it, what their kids are up to, their family, or rumors we hear about them, or the types of people they associate with. How toxic that can be. And it spreads, which is the problem. One person passes it on, and it often changes form too and becomes worse because the worse it is the more interesting it is. It's what caused so many Germans and others to be seduced by Nazism, as it developed gradually; first in the beer hall, then in the streets, then with Crystal Night, and then with the "final solution." Let us strive to put out the fire before it destroys the forest.

Gossip though are the words that come out, but what is in our hearts? One of the things that is easy to do is to scapegoat. It makes us feel united when the chips are down. Hitler used it in part to rally support as Germany dealt with the depression and crushing reparations of World War I to point to the Jews, who made up a small number of Germans. We see it too all the time. One group blames another for what's wrong in society, be it the economy, the pandemic, civil unrest, etc. This is not to say you can't criticize a political movement or an individual. You can look at a riot and say "that's wrong" and you can digest some statements we hear on cable news or in the media and say "that's just not right" and we can be disgusted by the actions of people. But where the line is crossed is when we say all people of a certain group are like that. I gave the example before, but when I was first ordained, I had a woman come up to me and complained about the pastor who was ordained in 1977; I'll never forget what she said "he and the ones from that generation have caused so many problems for our church." I wasn't sure what to say; I think I said something to the effect of "well the archbishop was ordained in the 70s and there's a number of good people from that era," but sometimes we paint broad strokes against people, and we need to make sure that animosity or even hate isn't in our hearts. There are political groups I do not at all like, there are movements

I'm opposed to, and you can ask hard questions about religions and organizations, but when we look at someone or a group and hate them, rather than just disagree with what they are saying or want to blame them for everything rather than engage with them or try to argue or present an opposing view, that's when we have a problem. Rather than perpetuate gossip, we can do what our Lord does - break it up. Notice he disempowers the mob. He doesn't enable them; he's silent, then writes in the ground, perhaps their sins, and lastly challenges them to think about which one of them has no sin. When we change the subject, or try to find something positive to say about someone we don't like, or even just walk away from toxic conversations, we can do the same and help people to think more deeply.

So, too, should we look at how we use our faith. The Pharisees and scribes are smart people; they know the rules and the laws. But they are using them to be violent and certainly not to help the woman. How do we do this with our faith? To exclude or bring people in? How do we treat the stranger or the people who aren't that active? The parent with the fussy child? How do we look at the so-called liberal or conservative Catholic? Sometimes in our hearts can be that "you don't belong" attitude if someone's been away

for a while, or maybe is of a particular theological bent different from ours. And again this is not to suggest that we shouldn't have an opinion. But disagreements on things can become toxic; they can tear a parish apart, and they can divide our Church. What we have to remember is we are a large Church, and we want to make people feel welcome. Sometimes we won't get "our way" - and we should respect where a parish goes, and certainly respect our bishops and our pope, and our fellow parishioners and Catholics, not go on and tear them down over coffee with someone or on our favorite online forum. With people, we want to do what we can to meet them where they are at; to listen to them; to pray for them and for ourselves if we recognize this tendency in our hearts to exclude others. That's what Jesus does. As the spirit of God left the Temple in the Old Testament because of the people's sinfulness and turning away from God and the commandments, Jesus now returns, bringing God back, and the Temple is where God meets the sinner. Our new Temple, each church, is where God meets us too in the confessional and in Communion. A love that is freely given, and may we strive to do this for one another.

Last week I flipped on the Oscars to see who would win, even though most of the stuff nominated I didn't see. When Chris Rock came out I got a laugh

but then the video stopped and I was trying to figure out what happened. Well moments after I learned that Will Smith wasn't happy with his joke. Debate whether or not he should have told the joke, but having seen Don Rickles before he died who made fun of everyone, sometimes an insult in comedy can be quite funny. But hopefully we can agree walking up and slapping someone isn't something one should do. What I found interesting though was when Chris Rock afterwards, in commenting on why he kept his cool and didn't fight back. talked about Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd. In his words, "You know when Elmer Fudd got really mad at Bugs Bunny? When Bugs Bunny kissed him. That's when he would lose his mind. When somebody does you wrong, just give them a kiss." Some good advice indeed, because in this world where so many of us are angry about this or that, we want to get others to feel better about ourselves, or blame others when maybe we should start trying to help them instead, taking a page from our Lord. For as our Lord says, let the one among you without sin be the first to cast a stone. Maybe he wrote the sins of the men in the ground, maybe not. But one by one they all drop their stones because they realize those words are true. We are all sinners, and maybe not so different from the people we least like. But thankfully as with this woman, our Lord looks at us with His love and mercy, not judgment and condemnation. May we

strive to truly hate the sin and not the sinner, realizing that yes we are different and yes, we should fight and stand up for what we believe in, but our commission is to be a fisher of men, and to use our faith to help people experience this love. May each of us, like the Kellners, be an instrument of mercy and, with God's grace, may our eyes be open to drop the stones of hate we want to hurl at one another, and be replaced with the love of God that can radiate through us when we let God's love flow through us to fill the world with what it needs now more than ever: love and mercy.