

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Celebrating its 70th Anniversary, 9:00 am-1:00 pm, Friday, December 7, 2018

St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral, Burlington, Vermont

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During this season of Advent when Christians throughout the world await the coming of the messianic age when the hearts and minds of individuals and nations will turn toward peace and justice for all, I recall the scriptural passage in which Jesus is asked when the realm of God will come, to which he responds, "The realm of God will not come in observable signs. Nor will people say, 'Look, here it is,' or, 'There it is,' for the realm of God is among you." (Luke 17:20-21) How might we embody and realize the realm of God among us?

In the midst of our nations so-called economic upturn amid increased violence against Muslims, Jews, people of color, immigrants from south of the border, and those who are not heterosexual, I'm reminded that Hitler during the early part of his regime was deeply loved by most German people because he, in their estimation, had led them out of an economic depression making them, therefore, more compliant to his attempt to rid the nation of its non-Arian communities he felt contributed to their hardships. If this picture looks uncomfortably familiar, it's because history will repeat itself if we fail to remember and learn from the horrendous mistakes of our past.

The Universal declaration of Human Rights, following World War II, the fall of Hitler's Nazi Germany and the creation of the United Nations, attempted to set forth the principles of a heavenly realm on earth; the principles of compassionate human behavior affirming the dignity of every human being regardless of race, religion, language, nationality, ethnicity, sex, political or philosophical affiliation and, more recently, regardless of sexual orientation, or gender identity. It was an attempt to learn from our past and not repeat our most horrendous mistakes.

Yet because the rights prescribed in this international declaration went beyond life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as outlined in our Declaration of Independence; and because this international declaration specified the equal humanity of women and men regardless of race, unlike our Declaration of Independence and early incarnations of our Constitution; and further, because this international declaration included among basic human rights equal access to quality housing, education, healthcare and employment, this Universal Declaration of Human Rights, while gaining the theoretical endorsement of the United States, lacked its compassionate advocacy.

Why? Because our then-president, Harry Truman, though progressive in many outstanding ways, was still a recovering bigot representing a nation still divided by Jim Crow segregation, anti-Semitism, misogyny, homophobia, resentment toward people of Japanese and Asian descent and a growing mistrust of anyone espousing Communist ideology.

America back then and even now, including Vermont, is not without the potential of repeating the horrors of Nazi Germany if we remain prisoners of our divided notions of reality and truth.

Many years ago, while home from college for a couple of days, I received a call from a dear friend, Tim, to meet him at a restaurant in town. When we met, it became quickly apparent that this was more than a restaurant. It was a gay bar and the setting where Tim would reveal he was not the person I had suspected him to be. In fact, this was more than a meeting. It was a set-up in which the table at which Tim and I sat was suddenly joined by close friends of his I never knew. Suddenly, I found myself way outside the walls I had constructed to prevent such a meeting. Yet it is this meeting that opened my eyes to see the hearts of those I once avoided.

As residents of one of the whitest states in the Union, if we wish to take the radically inclusive nature of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to heart, we must intentionally prepare ourselves by

placing ourselves into care, trust and dependency of others we've tried to avoid as a way of realizing that together we will overcome, divided we will surely fall.

And so, the preamble proclaims: *Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, the General Assembly proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations.*

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How might we embody and realize the realm of God on earth?
Amen.