

“Not in Our Town”

by Rev. Michael Schuenemeyer

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In December of 1993 a paving stone was hurled through 5-year-old, Isaac Schnitzer’s bedroom window in Billings, Montana. His window had been decorated for the season with a menorah, Star of David and “Happy Hanukkah”. The incident was one of a string of hate crimes 24 years ago in Billings, where the Ku Klux Klan distributed fliers, a Jewish cemetery was desecrated, and the home of a Native American family was painted with swastikas. Thousands of Billings’s citizens, including the faith community, government leaders, labor unions, and community organizations rallied to stand up for their Jewish neighbors and others who had been targeted. Thousands of paper menorahs were placed in the windows of their homes, many of which had been colored by children in their church schools, sending a clear message against hatred, bigotry, intolerance, and violence. “Not in our town!” the people declared.

I sing in the North Coast Men’s Chorus in Cleveland, Ohio, which sang a song in this year’s holiday concert about what happened in Billings, entitled “Not in Our Town”. I was overcome with emotion as we sang and the memory of this past year’s many incidents of hate and violence flooded my mind - the mass shootings, the brazen demonstrations from the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist groups, the violent murders of at least 25 transgender persons in the United States and more than 325 globally, the demonizing of immigrants, the unveiling of sexual assaults... And also, the countless ways in which people kept showing up to bring solidarity, public witness and action, working to transform the hatred and violence with love and justice.

Like the people in Billings in 1993, we know we are better than this and we know if we stand together, we can stop the hatred and violence that plagues our communities, our politics, our nation and world. December 25th is an important day in the religious calendar, when Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus, whose life and ministry, death and resurrection are at the heart of the Christian faith. I am reminded again this Christmas of his humble birth and servant ministry, placing love at the center of everything.

I continued to be empowered and inspired by a core value expressed in my own denomination, the United Church of Christ, one shared by many faiths throughout the world - that each of us is endowed by God with worth and

dignity that human judgment cannot set aside. As we close one of the most divisive and challenging years in our nation’s history, it is important we not begin the New Year resigned that what we have just experienced is the new norm. This is no time to be complacent about our future and the values that define who we are. The people of Billings, Montana and many others throughout history have proven that when we stand together for love, respect, justice and equality we can transform our communities and world. May the hope and promise of this season, of a just world for all, inspire us to take action and send a clear message to those who would perpetuate hate and violence, “Not in our town, not in our state, not in our country, not in our world.”

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