

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

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In the Presence of Evil

John 3:14

When this church building was dedicated in March of 1908, the pastor was Adelbert P. Higley. Higley served this congregation from November of 1906 to February of 1912. Shortly before he left Springfield Higley was asked by one of his elders to write a brief history of his pastorate. The elder was Clinton L. Conkling, a leader in the church and the city, and a man who cared deeply about the history of this church.

Higley wrote that the building was under construction when he arrived. He was impressed by the size of the building that was taking shape and the professionalism of the contractor to whom he was introduced on his first day in the city. Higley also took note of where the members lived in relation to the new church. He observed that “the building was not far from the geographical center of the congregation.” The new church would have a strong neighborhood base since most of its members would live within walking distance. Higley believed that an important part of the church’s mission would be to serve as the social center of this neighborhood.¹

It may be that the most revealing feature of Higley’s 26-page historical narrative is what he did not say. There is no reference in his glowing report to the event that took place just a few months after the building was dedicated and shook Springfield to its core. The Springfield race riot of August 1908 received national publicity which greatly damaged the reputation of the city that had nurtured Lincoln. Higley described in great detail the dedication of the church building and new program initiatives that took place during the first six months of 1908. Then he revealed that during the last six months of the year nothing happened.

Nothing happened? A mob which sometimes swelled to 4,000 people destroyed two dozen black and Jewish businesses. Forty homes in a black residential area were burned in one evening. Two African American men were lynched. Five thousand National Guard troops were brought in to restore order. It later became clear that not all of the violence was random. Black property owners were the high priority targets of this rampage. Worst of all one of the lynchings took place in the neighborhood where this church was to be the social center. William Donnegan was an African American who lived at Spring and Edwards Streets, just two blocks from the church. He was a cobbler who had done work for Abraham Lincoln. Some of the older members of this church undoubtedly knew him well. They had risked their lives together fifty years earlier as fellow workers in the Underground Railroad. The mob came to the 84 year old Donnegan’s house, cut his throat, and lynched him from a tree across the street.

The church is built. Evil closes in. The best that Adelbert Higley can tell us is that nothing happened. But his silence tells us something more. It tells us that the people of this church did not have an answer to the tragedy that was unfolding around them. When this congregation was founded in 1835 it was part of the Abolitionist movement. This was a national movement of Christian people who were committed to the cause of freeing the slaves. This movement gave them the tools to battle against the evils of slavery. Out of that struggle they developed a vision of a multi-racial society. They acted

on that vision by receiving African Americans into the membership of this church in the 1840s. Throughout the 19th century this church provided financial assistance to the Freedman's Association which helped former slaves to build a better life.

Well before 1908 it was clear that this congregation's vision of racial harmony had not succeeded in Springfield. Racist attitudes were forcing greater separation of the races in this city and in the nation as a whole. When the riot came the church witnessed the devastating consequences of the death of its vision. This time there was no national movement to give direction to those who wished to work for racial justice. The journalist William English Walling came to Springfield to cover the race riot. After interviewing hundreds of people he wrote these chilling words:

We at once discovered, to our amazement, that Springfield had no shame. She stood for the action of the mob. She hoped the rest of the negroes might flee. She threatened that the movement to drive them out would continue. I do not speak of the leading citizens but the masses of the people, of workingmen in the shops, the storekeepers in the stores, the drivers, the men on the street...On Sunday, August 16, the day after the second lynching, a leading white minister recommended the Southern disfranchisement scheme as a remedy for negro lawlessness, while all four ministers who were quoted in the press proposed swift "justice" for the negroes, rather than recommending true Christianity, democracy and brotherhood to the whites.²

Walling called what he observed in Springfield a race war. In this war it is clear that many of the white Protestant churches were on the wrong side. The war was directed against whites as well as blacks. Threatening letters were sent to white people who employed or did business with African Americans. Grocers received threats and were afraid to sell food to black people. The practitioners of evil set out to destroy every bridge which held the white and black communities together. With a history of standing for racial harmony, this congregation was in the cross hairs of the race war which had just exploded. Fear was in the air. The people of this church had no answer for the evil which surrounded them.

In the third chapter of John's Gospel Jesus is approached by a man who has run out of answers. Nicodemus shows his fear by coming to Jesus under the cover of darkness. Jesus responds to Nicodemus' questions by speaking of the new birth that re-centers our lives on God. He reminds Nicodemus of the story in the book of Numbers about a people who have no answer for the evil which surrounds them. The Israelites are wandering in the wilderness on their way to the promised land. They demonstrate how self centered they are when they complain constantly about the hardships of their existence. Then they discover that they are living in a snake pit and they cannot escape from the poisonous serpents. Suddenly their earlier complaints seem trivial indeed. In desperation they repent and call to God for help.

God responds in a surprising way. God does not remove the serpents or rescue the people from the snake pit. Instead God commands Moses to construct a bronze replica of a poisonous serpent. Those who have been bitten are to look upon the replica and confront the object of their fear. As they confront their fear in this manner they are restored to health.

Something like that happened at Edwards and Spring Streets one hundred years ago. When the mob arrived at William Donnegan's home he did not hide or run away. He stepped out on his porch to confront the poisonous hatred of this fearful gathering. His courage in the face of evil pointed the way for the civil rights movement which would then emerge and give shape to the struggle for justice in the

decades to come. As Donnegan confronted the object of his fear a powerful healing process was set in motion.³

The Gospel of John reminds us that the cross is already planted in the snake pits of our communities. To look at the cross is to see the love of Christ which delivers us from the poison of this world. That love enables us to re-center our existence and live in the healing power of God.

Endnotes

1. Adelbert P. Higley, "Historical Narrative of Pastorate," 1912.
2. William English Walling, "The Race War in the North," *Independent*, 3 September 1908, pages 529-534.
3. Other sources consulted in preparation of this sermon are:
 - James L. Crouthamel, *The Journal of Negro History*, Volume 45, No. 3 (July 1960), pages 164-181.
 - Roberta Senechal, *The Springfield Race Riot of 1908*, 1998, pages 1-8
 - *The Cook-Witter Report*, "Reflections on Springfield's Historic Race Riot," January 29, 2002, Vol. 17, Number 3, pages 1-4.
 - Richard E. Hart, "Lincoln's Springfield, The Underground Railroad, Part 2," pages 1-8 in *A Newsletter of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, Volume 8, Number 2, Summer of 2006.