

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

**Dr. Lonnie H. Lee**  
November 15, 2009

**Tearing Down the Walls**  
Mark 13:2

Last week I was traveling in Germany as that nation celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the tearing down of the Berlin wall. All week German television screens were filled with images of people joyfully hammering away at the wall, ripping it apart stone by stone. As everyone in Germany knows the tearing down of the wall also represents the collapse of the East German Communist system which made way for the reunification of the nation.

One of the purposes of my trip was to visit the village of Sollichau where my great-grandfather John Gottlieb Liebmann was born in 1848. Because of misspellings in old family records, the identity of this ancestral village remained a mystery until it came to light on ship passenger records which I found about three years ago. Sollichau is a village of about 900 people in the heart of the former Communist East Germany about halfway between Leipzig and Wittenberg. When I drove into Sollichau I saw the other side of the celebrations on the television screen. There was no spirit of celebration in Sollichau. After surviving the deprivations of 44 years of Communist rule, this town has no economic viability under Capitalism. While work was guaranteed to everyone under the former socialist system, today jobs are scarce. With the exception of a few large farming operations, there is no investment in this community. The stability of the past has vanished. You can see the result in the faces of the people. Their expressions are as gray and drab as their deteriorating buildings. Their eyes betray a sense of depression and fear. They are clearly threatened by the chaos of change unleashed when the wall came down.

The gospel of Mark was written to a people who were struggling with the chaos of a changing world. The institutions on which they have always depended to provide stability in the midst of change are in a state of collapse. The Roman-Jewish war has resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and its political and religious institutions. In the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter Mark reminds his people that Jesus anticipated the destruction of these institutions. Coming out of the temple with his disciples Jesus listened to someone speak of the magnificence of the temple buildings. Then Jesus said, "Do you see this great building? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down (Mark 13:2)." This is the destruction that Mark's people have lived to see.

Mark wants his people to understand that Jesus knew that change was coming but was not anxious about the chaos it would bring. Jesus' attention is not focused on the old world that is passing away. Jesus has his eye on the new world that is coming into being. Mark challenges his people to follow Jesus by leaving their fear behind so they can look for the new day God is ushering in.

An important element of this new future is highlighted in the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hebrews. There the biblical writer points out the theological implications of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Before the temple was destroyed the priests would gather daily to offer sacrifices for sin. But now that the temple is gone that practice is no more. The author of Hebrews proclaims that daily sacrifices are no longer needed because Christ's death has done the job once and for all.

In the old paradigm the priests waited every day for God's forgiveness. But in the new paradigm it is God who does the waiting. God is waiting for the redemption of the world to be complete. We are invited to be bold enough to enter fully into our redemption as we cast off the limitations of the past. We are empowered to aggressively pursue the mission that God has given to us because change has become our friend and not our enemy. The spirit of fear is replaced by a spirit of adventure.

When I arrived in the village of Sollichau I went first to the church looking for evidence of my ancestors. I did not see the family name on any of the graves. The church was locked as Protestant churches in Europe usually are during the week. So I began taking photographs of the church from various angles. I was of course hoping to meet someone who could tell me about the village, but since I don't speak any German and small town people in Germany usually don't speak English the odds were not in my favor. I had prepared for this by writing on a page the names and dates of my ancestors from this village with key words in German.

As I was taking pictures I became aware that a man working in a small building next to the church was standing at his window and staring at me. Then he began to wave at me, signaling me to come around to the front door. As I entered the building I realized that it was a small museum of village history. There I was met by the man who waved me in. Klaus-Dieter Heinecke was the town historian and as expected he did not speak any English. He pointed to his laptop computer which had on it the town web site which he had designed. The web site was familiar from my previous research on the town. I then showed him my page listing my Liebmann ancestors from the village. He said, "Ah, Liebmann" and did a quick internet search for Liebmann and immediately brought up one of my articles posted on the web. We couldn't talk to one another but we were fully connected by the digital world.

Klaus-Dieter then signaled me to stay where I was while he went outside. Five minutes later he came back accompanied by a man named Anas Aboubakari who was an immigrant from Kenya. Anas had been living in the village for about a year and could speak German and English. Together these two began quizzing me and sharing very interesting information about the village and my family history there. They pointed out the house where my great-grandfather lived. The building in which we were standing is the place where he attended school. They arranged for me to tour the church.

Later Anas explained to me how he got drafted to come to my aid. He said Klaus-Dieter ran into the street shouting, "Doesn't anyone speak English in this village? We finally have an American interested in us and no one can talk to him!" Anas heard the historian's cry for help and announced that he could speak English. Klaus-Dieter was surprised to learn that this African immigrant had such a useful skill, but he did not hesitate to put him to work. Anas was animated by the irony of this situation. He said that for more than a year he had been ignored by everyone in town. "They are afraid of my black skin and they refuse to have anything to do with me. And now all of a sudden I am important! I think I like this." Anas went on to explain how difficult it is to live in a place where everyone is ruled by an intense fear of the future.

My visit inadvertently gave Klaus-Dieter an opportunity to see what God's future looks like. The presence of people like Anas is not a threat. His fluency in English brings to the village a resource it did not have before. He is a sign of the new world that emerges when old walls are finally torn down.