

The swastika is an ancient religious symbol that dates back almost 11,000 years. But in 1920 the Nationalist Socialist German Worker's Party adopted it as their official insignia. Under Adolf Hitler, it became the symbol of the Third Reich and the embodiment of the worst kind of genocide imaginable. When it was recently painted on a wall at Lexington High School, we can only hope that the person who did so was unaware of the unspeakable horrors committed by Nazi Germany in the darkest days of World War II.

Needless to say, school officials acted very quickly to inform parents and to condemn what Lexington Police termed a hate crime. School Principal Laura Lasa termed it a very disappointing incident and underscored the school's "...uncompromising commitment to making the school building and the school day a welcoming place for all students, staff and families." Most importantly, she pointed out that the incident presents an excellent learning opportunity for students and the community. In her letter to parents she wrote "I am reminded that we have a learning opportunity as we share emotions and talk with others in a united effort to maintain an environment that upholds the values of respect and equality."

As Christians, it is very difficult for most of us to get inside of the Jewish experience of the holocaust and to know first-hand what it is like to be the object of another person's religious prejudice and hatred. This is also made more difficult because of the complicity of Christians over many centuries in the persecution of our Jewish brothers and sisters. Through ignorance, for centuries many Christians misread the Bible and ignored the fact that Jesus was Jewish and that our Christian faith is rooted deeply in the Hebrew Scriptures. The disciples of Jesus were all Jewish, a reality that is lost when we hear references to the Jews in the New Testament. We also forget that one of the earliest challenges that the Apostles faced was over the relationship between Judaism and the 'new way.' It is interesting to speculate what the last two thousand years would have been like if the Council of Jerusalem had decreed that the "new way" i.e. 'the followers of Jesus' was to be regarded as separate sect within Judaism!

The swastika incident at Lexington High School should become a learning experience not just for high school students but for our whole community. And the best way of doing that is by recalling where the swastika flag once flew so prominently: the German concentration camps of World War II.

In 1970, when I visited Dachau for the first time, I was deeply moved by the deaths of so many innocent and defenseless people, the vast majority of whom were singled out because of their Jewish identity. Located less than 10 miles from Munich in Southern Germany, it was the first of many concentration camps that were set up shortly after Hitler came to power in 1933. Over the course of its 12 years in existence, it saw the imprisonment of over 200,000 people and the deaths of over 40,000. It is only by contemplating the atrocities committed in places like Dachau and the millions more who were murdered in the attempted genocide of the Jewish people that we can appreciate the importance of publicizing and condemning the ignorant act of painting a swastika on the wall of a public bathroom.

In our own day, religious prejudice and other forms of prejudice are alive and well. It is interesting for us to note that the concentration camp at Dachau was less than a 30 minute trolley ride from Munich and not very far from the neighborhoods of average Germans. How they did not know what was taking place in their backyards is a question that will never be fully answered. What we do know is that willful ignorance can never be an excuse for sitting idly by in the face of injustice. It is incumbent upon the civilized world in which we live today to pay greater attention to the plights of those people whose only crime is their religion or being poor or being born in a war torn country.

We should keep all this in mind when we reflect upon the predicaments of refugees and immigrants today. For the most part, Muslims of every nationality are God fearing, peace loving people. How awful must it be for Muslims in this country to hear talk about a Muslim ban! How terrible must be the experience of being treated like a potential terrorist simply because of one's Muslim faith! Even talking about keeping Muslims out of our country sets a tone and sends a message that it is okay to discriminate against certain people based on their religion.

There is no question that we need an immigration policy that is fair and just. And there is no question that we need to be vigilant about allowing potential terrorists into our country. But we should not put our heads in the sand when we realize that some of our current political dialogue is fomenting a rising tide of anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant fervor.

Whenever we even seem to condone prejudice, we should remember the advice of 20th century philosopher George Santayana: "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." We are all God's children. The sooner we all begin to act this way, the sooner will the world we live in become a welcoming world for all.