

Remembering Our Ancestors in Faith- Liberal Evangelicals

A Sermon by Nancy Mack, delivered at EUCC on May 24, 2009

This is Memorial Day weekend- the time we set aside to honor the men and women who serve in the military and those who have died in the service of our country. It is also a time to remember all of those who have gone before us, who have had an impact on our lives. I thought that since in our capital campaign we are remembering our past with appreciation, it would be interesting to look at our ancestors in faith and to explore the history of our name.

In today's world, if we say that we are descendants of "liberal Evangelicals," some would say that this is an oxymoron. But I would like to tell you a story about our ancestors, about our roots, about what also becomes for me a family story. The story begins in 1817 when King Frederick Wilhelm III of Prussia, on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the Reformation, decided to merge the Reformed and the Lutheran branches of German Protestantism into the Evangelical Church of the Prussian Union. Former Eden president Carl Schneider called this union, "the greatest church-union movement of all times- committed to the spirit of Jesus, who knew neither Luther nor Zwingli nor Calvin and who would not have entrusted his Gospel to the formulations of any of them ...as the adequate embodiment of His redemptive truth." Now you have to realize that wars had been fought for hundreds of years over fine points of these doctrines, so to unite these two churches was a really radical move. This "united" church was strongly influenced by German pietism- a return to the "religion of the heart," in reaction against the creedal rigidity that caused the religious wars.

Preaching at the worship service celebrating this church union was Friedrich Schleiermacher, who has been called the father of modern theology and also, the founder of the school of liberal evangelical theology. Now this was the era of the Enlightenment, the age of reason, when all the old paradigms were being questioned. Geologists learned that the world was not, in fact only 4000 years old, but many millions of years old. Charles Darwin learned that the earth and its inhabitants weren't really created in 7 days, but, in fact, evolved over eons. Where does God fit into all this new knowledge? Some rationalists said that it proved that there is no God, there is only science. At the other end of the spectrum, were the people who maintained that science was wrong and that the Bible was literally true- dictated word for word by God. In the middle of these two extremes was our Schleiermacher, a true child of the Enlightenment, who said that it doesn't matter if the Bible is literally true, what matters is what it tells us about God, and about Christ, and about ourselves. True religion, he said, is a sense of the infinite that is a necessary part of being human. It is about our experience of being redeemed, of being part of the unity of all things.

So how do we become part of this story? Well, this “peace promoting” spirit of the Evangelical Church of the Prussian Union strongly influenced the foreign mission societies of Basel in Switzerland and Barmen in Germany. They sent a number of trained pastors to do mission work in this country. One of these young men was Louis Nollau, who happens to be my great, great grandfather. So now our story becomes a family story. Louis Nollau wanted to be a missionary to the Indians. He arrived in St. Louis from Germany in 1837 where he was to join another pastor and set out for the Oregon Territory by wagon train. However, his companion became ill and they missed the caravan leaving in the spring. Not wanting to wait until the following spring to leave, Nollau requested permission to go to Oregon by ship- down the Mississippi, around the tip of Cape Horn and up the western side of South and North America. This dream of mission work was not to be, because his companion became ill again and Nollau stayed to nurse him until his death. In the meantime, he had begun to preach at various locations in the area among the German settlers, although he did not feel at the time that he was fulfilling his “call” to do mission work.

In October of 1838 Nollau became pastor of a newly organized German Evangelical congregation in the Gravois settlement, now known as Mehlville. And here is where another part of our family story comes in. While the area was just called the Gravois settlement for many years, in 1875 the residents decided to name the town and called it Mehlville, after one of the oldest inhabitants of the town, Charles Mehl, great, great grandfather of Dee Mehl Ban.

But back in the late 1830’s, the German pastors were widely scattered on the frontier and experienced physical and social isolation. They were opposed on the one side by the rationalists among the German immigrants, who were very much against organized religion, opposition that sometimes bordered on physical violence. The Evangelical pastors also suffered from attacks by a group of Saxon Lutherans. This ultra-conservative group considered it a sin to serve a United Evangelical church because they believed that the Reformed were “children of Satan.” These folks were the precursors of the Missouri Synod Lutherans. Both the atheists and the religious conservatives were attacking this united church.

On Sept. 28, 1840, Nollau wrote a letter to a number of German Evangelical ministers, inviting them to a meeting at his parsonage in the Gravois settlement. There they formed the Evangelical Church Society of the West, which would later become the Evangelical Synod. The statement of faith that they adopted at that meeting made it clear that the intensity and fruits of faith were more important than doctrinal correctness. The *Kirkenverein* accomplished much in the first few years of its existence. They wrote a catechism, published a hymnal and started a seminary in Marthasville. Nollau was on the Board of Directors of the seminary and preached at the first graduation ceremony of what was to become Eden seminary.

In 1852 he was asked to take the position as pastor at St. Peter's church in St. Louis. During this period at St. Peter's, Louis Nollau seems to have channeled his call to be a missionary by devoting himself to the "inner mission," activities within congregations supporting good works and charitable institutions. Responding to the need for medical care among the poor German immigrants, Nollau rallied the *Kirchenverein* congregations to support the opening of a hospital, modeled on the Passavant Hospital in Pittsburg, the pioneer German-American deaconess hospital. In Nollau's first report to the Board, the following mission statement was accepted:

No distinction of creed, race, nationality, or color would be made in the acceptance or treatment of patients. Nor was the Hospital conceived as a proselytizing agency, but as a place of refuge for the needy, where poor patients were treated without charge and where everyone was assured of expert medical attention and friendly care.

This was in 1857, before the civil war. Given that Missouri was still a slave state, this "mission statement" is astounding to me. You can see that our predecessor denomination was not afraid to take on social justice issues. It would provide care to the needy, no exceptions. All were welcome at that hospital and at that table, regardless of their beliefs, their background, their color.

Between 1830 and 1850 in St. Louis there were three cholera epidemics and two fires, killing 20 percent of the immigrant population. There were many orphans roaming the streets and pastors took it upon themselves to care for many of them. In 1852 Nollau wrote "I have children in every cubbyhole, but that is fine. I have always felt that the gloomiest corner of any room is the one without a child in it." At the time he and his wife had four children of their own, plus two they adopted after finding them in a quarantined house hiding behind their mother's skirts. She had been dead for two days. The Nollaus often had whole families of children staying with them while he sought homes for them. The story is told that when he began his campaign for an orphan's home, more conservative members of the congregation raised their eyebrows at the thought of the expense. 'Why pastor, we haven't a thing with which to start an orphans' home,' one of them said. 'Oh yes we have,' replied Pastor Nollau, 'we have orphans.'" In 1858, the German Protestant Orphan's Home, which later became the Evangelical Children's Home, was born.

There is another part of this story a little closer to home, that gives me great humility. My father's parents died when he was young and he converted to Catholicism when he married my mother. I was raised a Catholic, never knowing about my "Evangelical" roots. Years later after I had "accidentally" joined a UCC church because it was the most theologically liberal in town, I learned about my ancestor, Louis Nollau. However, in the arrogance of the theological liberal, I was turned off to the pietistic rhetoric of being a terrible sinner and being "born

again." I lost interest until years later when I was "called" to research his life. What I found was a deeply devout man whose faith called him to do amazing social justice work of which I am now immensely proud. I was turned off to the word "evangelical," but now have come to reclaim it with pride and an open heart.

In our scripture today Jesus prays to His Father , "Holy One, protect them in your name, those that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one....As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." These Evangelical ancestors were sent into the world to spread the peace promoting message of the Gospel story- "that all may be one"; that all are welcome at the table. What matters is not doctrinal correctness. What matters is having a relationship with the living God that infuses our lives with love and hope and gratitude. What matters is having a relationship with the divine that inspires us to care for neighbor, to take stands that are not popular, that allows us, as we say at communion, "to see the living Christ in our midst, indeed in one another."