

Down in D.C. at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, right at the end of the permanent exhibition, after you've walked through hours' worth of horrors, there's a quote permanently affixed to the wall. You've just seen crowds of children making the Nazi salute. You've just walked through a sea of shoes collected from the gas chambers. You've been guided by stories and terrors and broken lives. And finally, just before you step back into the modern day and the relief of the way people are now, this quote meets you and reminds you that the past doesn't always stay in the past. "First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me." There are several versions of this quote, but this is the one bolted to that wall. There's several versions because after the war, Martin Niemöller said the same thing many times in his unrelenting fight against inaction in the face of evil.

Now, Niemöller was a complicated figure. He was a Lutheran pastor in Germany, and in the lead-up to World War II, he actually was a Nazi. He believed in a whole lot of the party's policies. He didn't love the way they treated people, but the people they treated poorly were people he disagreed with. It wasn't exactly inaction that Niemöller embodied. It was something more like having your cake and eating it, too. He got to enjoy both the economic and social policies while watching his political opponents get what was coming to them. But, as the persecutions of his fellow countrymen worsened, something in him changed. He shifted from enjoying their downfall to accepting their persecution because, hey, at least his politics were winning out. Then came the awareness that maybe this wasn't such a good situation. But by that point, speaking out was dangerous, so he and many others stayed silent. It wasn't until Hitler started interfering with his beloved Lutheran Church that Niemöller finally spoke up. For his troubles, Niemöller spent eight years in Nazi prisons and concentration camps, and after the war, he preached against the indifference of good people so much that he got a reputation for being a leftist, a great irony given how strongly conservative he actually was. He wasn't a leftist, he just knew better than most what happens when evil gets let loose.

I'm sure most of us have heard some version of Niemöller's quote, and I'm sure most of us have been inspired by it. I certainly have. It's been a guiding principle for me for a long time, and I remember the gut punch of encountering his words on that wall at the end of the Holocaust Museum. I'm moved by the call to action it presents and also the dangers of letting evil pass by when it simply nibbles away at good instead of devouring it all in one bite. But lately I'm beginning to wonder if there's a flaw in the entire premise of that quote. And I know, I'm stepping into some treacherous waters here. I did not live through what Niemöller lived through, thank God. Still, I wonder if there isn't an inherent self-centered-ness to it.

The entire premise relies on self-preservation. The gut-punch final line, "Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me," it's immensely powerful, but also, it all comes back to me. I should've spoken up earlier, I shouldn't have stood idly by because one day I'd be in danger. My problem with this lies in the beginnings of Niemöller in Nazi Germany. He was okay with his opponents gettin' theirs because it felt kinda good. Evil often does. The socialists and the union thugs, man it felt good to see them hurt. And the Jews? Western History's packed full of times when so-called good, Christian folk were just fine with the Jews suffering. It's only when he realized that he was in trouble that he finally regretted teaming up with the Devil. And that's my issue here. I'm actually a little less inspired by Niemöller now than I was just a few years ago, and what changed was a growing meanness in our political world. We don't want to see our enemies lose, we

want to see them obliterated. And we justify it because that's the other side, and we all know just how wrong they are. But we've lost compassion for our political rivals.

Down in Florida, which, sidebar here: Florida and Tennessee and even my beloved Arkansas have become easy punching bags as of late. We all know how crazy things are down South. And we can get away with talking about their meanness because they're just so far away. Nothing like that would ever happen up here. Or so we think. Back to Florida. They've started all these ant-LGBTQ bills. You've heard of 'em. There was the "don't say gay" bill. That was bad enough, but it's escalated. Now, children can be taken away from their families if a parent gets gender-affirming medical care. There's even a bill so nebulous in its wording that it prevents certain kinds of treatment for breast and prostate cancers. And Niemöller's quote is popping up. There've even been remixes of it with lines like, "First they came for the drag queens" or "Then they came for the trans kids." But they all end in the same place, "then they came for me." And yes, good. If this self-preservation spurs on some action, great. But what if, instead of protecting drag queens or women or trans kids or trade unionists because, when it comes down to it, I'm actually just protecting myself, what if we spoke up for drag queens or women or trans kids or trade unionists to protect them? What if we actually had some compassion for them? I know, wild idea.

There's this great line in the Lazarus story. For the whole first half, Jesus is away doing Jesus stuff. Lazarus is sick and might not make it, and by the time Jesus gets to Bethany, Lazarus died and his sisters are grieving. Jesus sees their suffering and weeps. Jesus weeps. And it's their suffering that turns the story from one we've all experienced into a miracle. Jesus weeps, and from there, it's compassion to the extreme that revives the dead man. Even delayed, it's compassion that changes everything. Jesus weeps. Down in Florida and everywhere else too, we're in desperate need of some compassion. Disagree all you want, but leave space for people to live. I know it's not quite the same as Lazarus emerging from his tomb, but if there's something needs reviving in our world, it's compassion.

So, I wonder if there's a way to take Niemöller's old quote and tweak it. With compassion, with the tears of Christ, with our own world, maybe it'd go something like this: "First they came for the drag queens -- and we stood up. Not because we are drag queens, but because they are human beings. Because they bear the image of God. Because they deserve dignity and respect. Because it's compassion that changes everything." It's not about me. It's not about you. It's about them. It's about loving them.