

Upcoming Events

“Wister and More” presents Filament
Sunday, December 12, 2021 at 3:00pm

Filament is a chamber ensemble, formed in 2019, of Philadelphia-based period-instrument soloists. Comprising a core trio of violin, viola da gamba, and keyboards, its respective founding members are Evan Few, Elena Smith, and John Walthausen.

Library Treasure Tour – The Golden Age of Travel: Alexander von Humbolt and his Contemporaries
Saturday, December 18, 2021 at 2:00pm

Enjoy armchair travel around the world in this hands-on seminar, led by Dr. Harry Liebersohn professor of history who has written widely on cultural encounters in travel accounts, music and literature.

“Wister and More” presents Claire Huangci, Piano
Sunday, January 9, 2022 at 3:00pm

After studying at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, Claire Huangci moved to Germany for further studies at the Hannover Musikhochschule. Early in her artistic career, Huangci stood out as an expressive interpreter of Chopin. She was also the youngest participant to receive second prize at the International ARD Music Competition in 2011.

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA *Friday Film Fest Series*



Zwingli. Der Reformator

Directed by Stefan Haupt

November 19, 2021

• 6:30 PM •

Film, Food & Discussion

The German Society of Pennsylvania

611 Spring Garden St.

Philadelphia, PA 19123

Support provided in part by the
Philadelphia Cultural Fund.



Zwingli - The Reformer

Director: Stefan Haupt
Script: Simone Schmid
Producer: Anne Walser
Music: Patrick Storck
Cinematography: Michael Hammon
Release Date: January 2019
Spieldauer: 120 minutes
Cast: **Max Simonischek** (Ulrich Zwingli)
Sara Sophia Meyer (Anna Reinhart)
Charlotte Schwab (Maria)
Anatole Taubman (Leo Jud)
Stefan Kurt (Bürgermeister Röist)
Oscar Bingisser (Johann Faber)
Rachel Braunschweig (Äbtissin Katharina von Zimmern)
Michael Finger (Felix Mantz)
Aaron Hitz (Konrad Grebel)

Commentary: A. Krumm

The Great Passion

Karl Barth called it “*the great passion*”, plumbing the depths of his own experience to retrieve its essence: “...*a great, unconquerable, permanent, and even dangerous passion...*”, whose animating desire was to attain “...*active knowledge and attestation of the work and word of God...*” In every age, *verzaubert oder entzaubert*, there are those who are consumed by this passion and such consumptive souls inevitably seek therapy by engrossing themselves in the task of “*Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth...*” Dividing the Word is fraught with consequences, sometimes engendering loving unity and sometimes provoking savage enmity among the faithful. The problem inheres in that contingent adverb ‘rightly’.

In 1516 Johann Froben of Basel published Erasmus of Rotterdam’s edition of the Greek New Testament, democratizing access to the Word. Now those afflicted with the great passion had over the counter access to the Word in the original Greek. Before Barth, before Brunner, before Bullinger, even before Calvin, this great pas-



sion was ignited in another Swiss theologian named Ulrich Zwingli. At the Battle of Marignano in 1515, a horrific battle where nearly half of the Swiss mercenary soldiers were killed, Zwingli’s eyes were opened to the evils of war in general and mercenary service in particular. It also shattered his allegiance to the Papacy (although he continued to accept a papal pension until 1520), leaving him searching for a sure way of accessing the truth.



Ulrich Zwingli

Returning from the war, he left the village of Glarus where he had been serving as a loyal catholic priest (and where many of the mercenary soldiers killed at Marignano were from) and secluded himself in Einsiedeln, where he essentially absconded from political engagement and practical affairs and immersed himself in the study of Greek and the text of the Greek New Testament. Long before Zwingli became *Leutpriester* of the Grossmünster in Zürich in January of 1519, he had begun passionately dividing the Word.

The great passion was shared by many of Zwingli’s countrymen, including Jacob Grebel and his son Conrad, Balthasar Hubmaier and Felix Mantz. All of them were willing to die for God’s Word, but in the interim they wanted to live for God’s Word because they were passionately certain, armed as they were with Erasmus’ edition of the New Testament, that they could get themselves and society right with God by exegeting their way to the Kingdom of God.

These men became Zwingli’s passionate followers and even collaborators. And indeed, for several years, Zwingli was in accord with his radical partisans. He sided with them over *Das Zürcher Wursteszen* (the affair of the sausages of 1522 - not fasting during Lent). He married that same year, backing clerical marriage by example; he preached on the symbolic nature of the Eucharist; he was in favor of removing images from the Churches, but believed it should be done slowly.

Even as late as 1523, Zwingli seemed to echo the radicals pessimistic view of the State:

"I believe that, as the church came into existence by blood, so it can be renewed only by blood [suffering witness], not otherwise....Never will the world be a friend to Christ, and with persecutions is that promised recompense of Christ. He sent his own as 'sheep among wolves.'"

Yet passionate pursuit can be deadly, culminating in violent collisions when finite and fallible men attempt to integrate transcendent truths with the immanent exigencies of human society. In pursuing *active knowledge* of the Word, doctrines and practices emerged that threw into stark relief the differing interpretations of the nature of the interface between the spiritual and the profane. Among these were infant baptism and oaths-taking. The radicals in his midst rejected these practices as being contrary to scripture. Zwingli defended these practices as legitimately derived from scripture. More importantly, he believed such radical change had the potential to destroy the fabric of civil society.

Zwingli believed in a corporate theory of society, and that entailed a civic form of Christianity. The hierarchical powers and structures of secular society existed to protect and support the community of believers. Therefore, a properly shaped political space included both a secular political community and the Christian community. These communities were innately intertwined and could never be separated without destroying both. The magistrates were Zwingli's indispensable allies in weeding out the theological *Wildwuchs* which threatened to choke out the true faith.

The radicals believed that secular authority was essentially the problem, heightened by their sense that the apocalypse was nigh anyway. Seeing themselves as a "righteous remnant", it was thus self-defeating to subordinate and/or integrate the church and the lives of believers with secular society. The Anabaptists wanted autonomy, with no human structures and no mediator other than Jesus between themselves and God. They rejected any hierarchy, whether priestly or magisterial when it came to their community of faith.

Both Zwingli and the radicals averred that they were armed with *πανοπλία τοῦ θεοῦ*. (the whole armor of God, which is gained by rightly dividing (interpreting) and then fully implementing and liv-

ing out what is taught by the Word of God). Romans 13 could serve as a foundational text for Zwingli: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.,,". The radicals would appeal to Acts 5:29: "We must obey God rather than men...", and they would subordinate the reading of Romans 13 to that of Revelation 13 (the beast representing civil authority): "...Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

By 1525, the rift between Zwingli and the radicals was irreparable. Both sides fervently espoused sola scriptura and the perspicacity of that naked scripture. Each side was driven to implement their mutually exclusive interpretations of the Word, rejecting any coexistence or compromise as a betrayal of their faith.

Power is seductive, able to arouse those who possess it as well as those bereft of it. Ineluctably, in this clash of absolutes, the spiritual agonists on both sides succumbed to temptation, impelling the power-



Max Simonischek as Zwingli

ful to kill in order to defend the faith, and the powerless to willingly solicit death in order to defend the faith. This recursive dynamic proceeded accordingly. With Zwingli's approval, likely even because of his urging, Jacob Grebel was beheaded in October of 1526, and Felix Mantz was executed by drowning in January of 1527. Hubmaier had been tortured and expelled from Zurich in 1526.

Unfortunately, killing Anabaptists was not a final solution. There were multiple theological and political fault lines in play. Along with the doctrinal divisions, this being Switzerland, regional and local politics were equally powerful. Just as Zwingli and his followers were threatened by the Anabaptists, the alpine Catholic Cantons to the south (the core of the original Swiss confederation) being passionately independent and passionately Catholic, felt threatened by the events unfolding in Zurich. The focus of their hostility was Zwingli himself, whom they regarded as a political revolutionary and a religious heretic.

Tensions erupted into a short-lived conflict in 1529, with Zurich gaining the upper hand. In that same year, Zwingli was a key mobilizer in getting the various evangelical communities to unite as the Christian Civic Union. Then Zwingli and the Zurich magistrates, in a fit of obtuse hubris, implemented an economic blockade against the Catholic Cantons. Since these cantons were not allowed to sell their livestock, milk and cheese in the territories of the Christian Civic Union, conversely they could not buy any grain, wine, iron or salt. The existential choice was economic ruin or war. In October of 1531, the Catholic Cantons, albeit utterly devoid of sympathy for monarchy, opted for the final argument of Kings.

The fortunes of war are notoriously capricious, irrespective of the doctrinal devotion of the respective combatants. In 1529, Zwingli and Zurich had total superiority in terms of men and materials. Zwingli had in the interim continually urged another conflict. Yet by 1531, Zurich and her allies were utterly unprepared for war. When the Catholic Cantons advanced toward the border, Zurich (left in the lurch by its temporizing ally Bern) was only able to muster a few thousand men.

Unlike the Anabaptists, the Catholics agreed with Zwingli about the need to use power to defend the faith, not to mention their economic interests. At the second battle of Kappel in October of 1531, they had more power. They used that power to kill a good many Protestants, Zwingli among them. Having killed him, they quartered his body, burned the pieces, and mixed the ashes with dung. They did so passionately, in God's service. In classical tragedy, a fall is supposed to evoke pity and terror. In the case of Zwingli, it is difficult not to admire his raw courage. He had preached war, and when the time came, he did not shirk his duty, doubtless knowing he would not return from the battle.

So ended Zwingli's life, a man who genuinely hated war and fervently loved his countrymen. A quintessential soldier of Christ, imbued with Erasmian pacifism, Zwingli had died fighting against his own countrymen, as a willing participant in a war in the service of a secular government, pursuing what can readily be construed as the exigencies and interim ethics of *Machtpolitik*. How do we parse this paradox? Was it his great passion to achieve a correct knowledge of the word and work of God and the concomitant duty to implement

that knowledge, that led him to justify armed doctrine?

Or was it his knowledge of himself (and, writ large, his knowledge of human nature) that led him down the path of force, seeing the situation as a purely situational dynamic, a unique and specific constellation of circumstances that compelled him to act as he did? Perhaps neither Zwingli nor the Anabaptists could have explained the irony of the trajectory and denouement of their respective lives. Luther summed things up with typically brutal clarity. Upon hearing of Zwingli's death, he merely remarked: "All who take the sword die by the sword." And the Anabaptists? In the wake of the Peasant Rebellion, the sentiments of Luther and the other magisterial Reformers concerning the Anabaptists were akin to those of General Sheridan concerning the Indians, summed up in the latter's infamous aphorism: the only good one is a dead one.

A secular age looks back upon those times and such individuals with wonderment. The physical courage of Zwingli as well as of the Anabaptists can still be grasped, albeit dimly. But the spiritual conviction of men like Zwingli and the Anabaptists is beyond the ken of a secular worldview, to the point of engendering cognitive dissonance. Absent a transcendent telos, with only the entangling immanence of a material world with which to underwrite existence, there is nothing ultimately worth living for, and certainly nothing worth dying for. Hence the utter commitment displayed by Zwingli as well as his foes is utterly alien to the disenchanting mind.

The great passion that gripped Zwingli and his spiritual *Zeitgenossen*, is an enduring passion, because it speaks to an enduring human need, the need to seek and find God. Barth couched this need in terms of freedom: "*The freedom to call upon God is authentic freedom, not one of the inauthentic freedoms that man usually arrogates to himself...*" All too often the great passion has become contaminated or deflected by all too human passions, and all too often it has culminated in conflict. Yet the great passion has also kindled light and love throughout the generations, when those seeking to rightly divide the Word have employed the proper exegetical key: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."