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Adolf Behrenberg, 63, Pastor Of a Church in Jersey 35 Years

The Rev. Dr. Adolph H. Behrenberg, for 35 years the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Metuchen, N.J., died in Dec. 30 in a Plainfield (N.J.) nursing home. He was 63 years old. His residence was at 260 Woodbridge Avenue, Metuchen.

During his years as a pastor, the congregation increased from 300 to 2,300 members, and he was a widely traveled lecturer and author of numerous articles. He traveled through 112 countries and six continents, and circled the world 11 times.

His lectures and sermons were heard in Japan, Nepal, India, Malaysia, Scotland, England, the Netherlands and Germany, among other nations. He lectured also for 13 consecutive summers at the American Church in Paris.

Dr. Behrenberg, who met many of the key religious and governmental leaders in his travels, won his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Pittsburgh in 1935, his bachelor of divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1938, his master of theology degree at Princeton in 1939, and his Ph.D. from Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1942. He later studied at Oxford University in England.

He is survived by a brother, Robert W. Behrenberg of Pittsburgh.

—New York Times January 7, 1978

In the Fall of 2018 I took a tour of 260 Woodbridge Avenue, Metuchen, New Jersey. A highlight of the tour was the historic newel post. A staff member of the church offered the provenance. Dr. Mason was a friend of Thomas Edison. The inventor dined here often and this light was one of his inventions. He installed it for the pastor. Also of note was another long-time pastor Dr. Behrenberg. (Dr. Mason was the pastor for 50 years.) Dr. Behrenberg filled the manse with treasures from his travels. The house was like a museum was the claim.

At this point the associate pastor interjected, "and he kept houseboys in the attic too." A bit flustered, the staff member said, Dr. B. was gay. And there were rumors he brought "houseboys" back from his travels. And with the rumor of sex trafficking at our new home we continued the tour.

The irony of that moment would come clear three years later when rumors of the associate pastor abusing his office with sexual relationships with parishioners. I will never forget receiving a written and signed complaint accusing the associate pastor of abuse. It just seemed too full circle. In the months that followed the accusation and investigation that proved the allegations true, I was deeply troubled by the damage done by secrets and sexual misconduct.

Even though Dr. Behrenberg has been gone for nearly fifty, he is not forgotten. It is impossible to walk the church without him. There is the chapel dedicated to Behrenberg; there is the portrait of him in the session room; there is the garden at the heart of the church with his name on the fountain and his body buried beneath it. And as if that were not enough, there is a bronze bust. Behrenberg died in 1977, but he is very much present. You cannot walk the halls and rooms of the church and not bump into his image and name. Yet, so is the "rumor."

Behrenberg is also very much a part of the identity of the older congregants. Each funeral I did in the first few years of ministry had a moment of pause where "Dr. B" would be mentioned. How he visited their home; how he was commanding in the pulpit; how he frightened the children and wouldn't allow them in the sanctuary during worship. He liked to wear a cape. His image was not just in the paintings and bronze bust but in the memory of many.

All of these factors came to a head one night in a committee meeting. A concerned parent wondered out loud if the rumors of sexual trafficking should be considered, and thus, should we reconsider his legacy? Are we not creating a context of dishonesty was the inferred concern. Having just lived through the damage of abuse, should we not address this past instance? An older member of the committee quickly shut this down. No. That is the past. Leave it there.

After the meeting adjourned I found myself in a funk in my office. As someone trained in the nuance of critical historical inquiry, the idea of reappraising history was not depressing, nor was the charge to "leave it alone" all that surprising. Sometimes oblivion is a mercy. What left me so unsettled was the idea that I had simply accepted the rumor. A pastor of the church

trafficked in the sex trade. Many of the older parishioners would describe Behrenberg's sexual orientation as an "open secret." "Everyone knew" was the persistent claim I heard. Was this other claim of "houseboys" part of the open secret?

It was then it hit me. This later claim was a rumor. Having just lived through the painful destruction of what clergy abuse can bring to a church I was acutely aware of the difference between rumor and written allegation. The difference is crucial. Yet had not forty years of time blurred that line? Blurry or clear, I had accepted a rumor as truth.

In that moment I felt compelled to do something to counter my mistake. What I desired was to somehow hear his voice. He was a silent image. An engraved name, a bust, a portrait, but none of those really conveyed the stories I had heard. What did he sound like when he preached; what about his lectures and articles? There had to be something somewhere. I wanted hear him.

In the next week I started to dig. The first thing I found was the obituary. Although not his voice, it was interesting to consider the New York Times reported his death. But then I found a reference in a description concerning the special collections at Princeton Theological Seminary. As the reference was vague, I wrote the archivist, Brian. I explained who I was and a bit of why I was interested. Brian was quick to respond. Indeed they had papers of Dr. Behrenberg. They had more than 40 boxes of material. Attached, he wrote, was the content list of the collection.

Reading the first set of boxes I was excited. All thirty-five years of sermons; all thirty years of travelogues. But then I was stunned: 35 years of diaries. Diaries?

For the better part of a year, I drove down to Princeton and spent half a day each week with "Dr. B." I started off with a clear purpose. I just wanted to read the sermons. I needed to hear his voice and 35 years of sermons would certainly provide for this. And it did. Behrenberg's voice was very present in his sermons, especially his bombast and bluster. What was also present was a clear theological perspective and the cosmopolitan views of a man who had seen the world. I will always be struck that his first sermon and one his last had the same claim, the same point. He was unchanged in his conviction.

After sampling more than a hundred sermons, a second question took hold. I now knew his voice. This voice was strong, edgy, just as ready to proclaim the war in Vietnam was illegal as he was to claim the Pope was drug addled. This voice had become familiar to me. What I now wanted to know was the voice of the diaries. Was it the same voice? Was the man in the pulpit the same man as in the manse?

On my first day reading the diaries, from the first page, I got the answer. No. The voice in the manse was timid, a wreck, often fearful and worried about death. The command of the pulpit was nowhere to be found. Yet, there was one aspect of the diaries that was consistent with the sermons. He was disciplined and kept to his course. Each sermon was two pages single spaced without margins. Each day he wrote a full page in his diary, top to bottom. How he completed

the task was consistent, radically similar. What he said, how he spoke, completely different. In the diaries was a different voice.

In the next two vignettes I will try to capture each voice. The voice in the pulpit and the voice in the manse. I do this not only to provide a glimpse into a fascinating person and legacy, but also to mend the damage of rumor. After reading the diaries, it is with a fair amount of confidence that I can say the rumors were untrue. I can see now how they might have come to be, but from his daily entries and the life which is so transparent it would be a wildly inconsistent and implausible claim that he "brought houseboys back from Asia." Near the end of his life "Dr. B" opened his house to the son of friends from England so he could study at Rutgers. Runjieth came to live at 260 Woodbridge Avenue in 1973-1976. His family was from India so he may have appeared East Asian to the Metuchenites of the 1970s. But Runjieth was not a houseboy. In fact what led Behrenberg to write to his parents and complain was how little work their son was willing to do, how he was always in a bit of trouble, and how the dating life of a college student was incompatible with the tranquility of the manse.

I could see where the rumor might have originated, but I could also see how implausible.

As we near the 50th anniversary of his passing, I believe it is timely to take advantage of his archival collection at Princeton. His collected papers, once combined with his diaries, provide a profound glimpse on a unique life. A scholar would be well rewarded to invest time in a long study of how the pulpit and the manse could be so different. His two voices are quite intriguing. For us, though, it is enough to repair the damage of rumor. We may not need to place his bronze bust in the narthex of the church on Sunday mornings, but we need not remove his name from the chapel.