

--- Policka Press ---

Information and thoughts from the Czech Republic

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Classes

October came and went in a blur. It is fitting that this is how the month presented itself, as Jamie and I had special programs taking place every week. Each day was a buildup to an event and then the countdown would restart the following week, so it was hard to reflect on what had just come before. It was fast, fun and stressful. Yet, the two programs that stick out, in my mind, would have to be the adult “movie night” that took place on October 14th and the Halloween party, which was on October 31st.

Since the Halloween party just ended, I will write about this activity first. Then, later on in this newsletter, I will publish my blog post about the movie night, so do not be distressed! You will have a chance to hear about both.

Our theme for this year’s Halloween was, the “haunted town.” Jamie had a wonderful idea to bring the American tradition of “trick-or-treating” to the Czech Republic. We wanted to be respectful in how we presented this aspect of American culture, because many Czechs are leery and down-right opposed to the encroachments of American culture into their lives.

all, their children receive enough of it through music, television and fashion styles. Thus, we thought relegating the trick-or-treating to the church sanctuary was a good way to introduce the idea, while keeping our culture at a respectful distance.

To say that making a haunted town out of cardboard was a daunting task, is an understatement. We needed help. In my classes, since I have the teenagers, I proposed the idea of a work day a full week before the party. I was initially worried at how much interest it would garner, as working for four hours, on a Saturday, is not too much fun. But, I was pleased to get about seven students to commit; and, wouldn’t you know it, they all showed up! We had a great time working and laughing. The high school students made decorations, fake grave stones and built cardboard buildings; a butchers’ shop, a school, a bakery, a cemetery and two houses! So, with the town built, Jamie and I focused on the organization.

The game plan was to have the students make a treat bag when they entered the door, which would serve as the place to put the candy. Splitting the kids up into groups would work to effectively manage how many went into the haunted town at-a-time, anticipating that around 40 students would show up. Those who helped make the town would be the “chosen” volunteers to reside in the cardboard buildings. They each would have candy to hand out to the kids when they came past. We asked the volunteers to look and act scary, which was easy to do; considering, Czechs like the “spooky” part of Halloween, not the quirky.

The highlight of the party would be the haunted town, but we had a set of games planned: bobbing for apples, bean-bag toss, drawing, a costume contest, musical chairs, and a feel-the-nasty-stuff-in-the-box activity.

It was a lot of preparation and Jamie worked excessively hard all week to prepare. So, we were a little disappointed when only 20 students showed up. The reason for such a low crowd was the result of the 80th celebration off the school next door: many of the kids had to attend

Wonderful time with the children who came.

In the end, the lessons that were learned from this experience are as follows: there is a good core of high school students who are committed to helping our programs; Ashley Clever is “hoss,” as she sent us a “Halloween package” from the U.S.A., which was integral to our party; we need more games for next year; Czechs will chose anything over a “church” activity, home-made costumes are much better than store bought; and, the concept of “trick-or-treat” is hard for Czech kids to understand.

If you are interested in checking out more pictures, please look at our blog!

Culture

I am writing this newsletter at the time that many of you (on the east coast) are in line to vote for our next president. And while there must be a lot going through your minds in regards to the future of where our nation will position itself in the world, how we will rectify an economy gone sour and when we will end the war in Iraq, I want to remind you that it is imperative that we vote as people who care about issues, not cheapness..

To explore this theme a little bit deeper, I think it is important to look at what just occurred here, in the Czech Republic.

About three weeks ago, the Czech Republic held its “regional” elections.: I am not going to explain to you what this means, because I don’t want to write five pages, but just know, that the “regional” elections are the equivalent to congressional races in the United States. As many of you know, the Czech Republic is a young Democracy and is not a two-party system, like the United Sates. Instead, there are numerous parties to chose from, some which are more popular in certain parts of the country than others.

However, if one had to pick the two parties who are the most powerful, it would have to be ODS (conservative) and CSSD (liberal, social democrats).

ODS has dominated Czech politics for the past four years: they have the presidency and a majority in the congress; however, when the election results were tallied, the ODS failed miserably. They were unable to win any state. The CSSD, like the knight on the white stallion, came in gallantly and won every single state in the Czech Republic by astronomical numbers. So, what was it that distressed the Czech people so badly that they effectively created a “voter-revolution?”

To find the answer, all one has to do is talk to a few Czechs about the issues that are controversial in Czech politics, and, what one would find, is a health

care debate about 30 Crowns.

In the United States we argue over healthcare as well. Normally, the discussion is about universal versus privatized, or how we, as a nation, can ensure the safety of the children and families who do not have any form of insurance. You see, in the United States the debate is about ATTAINING health support, but in the Czech Republic, everyone receives it from the state. So, what is the problem?

About a year ago, the leaders of ODS proposed a plan that would obligate the Czech populace to pay for their doctor and hospital visits; settling on the 30 Crown price, which is the equivalent of two dollars. Many Czechs flew into a frenzy. Injustice! Robbery! You’re charging our HUMAN rights! Because, you see, this idea of paying into the national system outside of taxes was new to Czechs. They are used to democratic socialist state, so this came as a shock.

As an American, I could not grasp the injustice that was being spoken of; after all, it is just two dollars! “What is the big deal,” I thought. When some Czechs told me that it would put some poorer people into financial crisis, I couldn’t help but laugh: “Are you serious!? You spend 40 Crowns a night on beer! How is this going to kill your finances?” I guess many do not think about it that way. I did not want to offend them, but I felt there was a lack of responsibility to take charge and care for the medical system.

The CSSD played on this fear. They had a national campaign that focused on getting rid of the 30 Crown payment to doctors. They were beating the war drums of injustice, painting the ODS as the party out-of-touch with the normal working man and as a party for the rich, not for the poor. People jumped onto their campaign promises. I could not believe it.

What mattered to most voters was two dollars. Now, I am sure there were more discussions and reasons for the CSSD’s victory, but I have yet to hear any. Rarely will a CSSD supporter tell me about issues of substance: international standing, future hopes for their democracy, fiscal and personal responsibility etc.

I feel as if I have become muddled, so to conclude, this is my hope: I do not wish to paint the Czechs as unintelligent voters. I want to point out that political parties will play on any cultural or social “wedge” they can to attain power. In the United States this comes across in many different issues. I leave it up to you, as voters, to search those issues for yourself. Yet, as Christian voters we need to be humble, respectful, loving and above reproach in your political discourse: do not fall into race mongering; acknowledge that voting is a first step, not a last step

remember that our hope is not found in a political party or a political candidate; and, lastly, no matter who wins or loses, make sure that we hold them accountable to running a government that is just in its dealings with the rich, the poor, the middle-class and the international community. In the end, let us be people of substance, not of cheapness. Let us not vote over two dollars, but let us be relevant in bringing the Gospel message in a wide array of creative ways.

Best of Blog

Tuesday night was our first installment of "filmové večery," or in English, "movie night!" We decided that we wanted to show *This is England*, directed by Shane Meadows. It is a film about the absurdity of the skinhead culture with its triumvirate characteristics of hate, violence and blame. Set in England in 1983, the movie follows the semi-autobiographical account of a young boy named Shaun who finds his only solace from bullying and loneliness in the skinhead movement; he develops a friendship with a group of skinhead teenagers. The movie takes a dramatic turn when an older, more politically involved skinhead, named Combo, returns from a 3 1/2 year prison sentence. Combo preaches a doctrine of nationalism and racism that splits the teenage skinhead group into two. Shaun chooses to stay with Combo and the more violent brand. Eventually, Combo will turn on the group, as violence and hate destroy Shaun's world and nearly kill his friend, Milky.

At 7:10 we had about 10 people in the church; then, at 7:15, we had 20. I could not believe it, neither could Jan. We had a massive group: there were adults, community members who walked in off the street, teenagers and, my favorite, the local punk rockers. I gave a brief introduction to the movie and then let it "roll." I stopped the movie in the middle and gave a brief synopsis on what happened thus far and what is gearing for the end. The punks who were in the room were getting very tense with what I was saying about the skinhead culture. I believe they came, because they wanted to watch a movie that would edify the culture, and here I was, subverting it. The themes of despair and hate are easy to miss in this movie if one does not speak English, or is not a critical viewer; so, it was important that I tell the truth, even if I knew the punk rockers in the back of the room were going to get defensive. Jan claims that he could feel their hands on the table grip tighter the more I spoke. I was sweating, as I thought about what to say. I didn't want to shut the door to dialogue on our first meeting; I wanted to open the conversation up and I wanted this

movie to get the ball rolling. I was very particular about what I said and how I phrased it. I did not want to alienate or attack the punk rockers. I let the movie continue and at the end gave a two minute statement on the futility of building your whole cultural paradigm around hate. I feel that I did an ample job of walking the line between not offending the punks who were in my presence, yet not letting violence get the last word.

The other Czechs who were in attendance loved the movie. I heard nothing but positive feedback. People who couldn't even speak English came up to me and told me that the movie was powerful (mocný). I guess it just goes to show you that human emotion transcends all cultural/language barriers. Even the punk rockers came up and gave me a handshake. I asked them if we could talk more outside of church and they all agreed. Jan was very happy with how the night turned out.

Cultural influences arise in the most unexpected ways. Last night, while showing the movie, I could not comfort myself, as I was tormented by the fact that I was showing a film, in a Church, that had copious amounts of swearing, violence and some sexual content. Even the fact that Jan, the pastor of the Church, was in complete support of showing such a movie was shocking to me. In the United States, there would be no way I would be able to show such a film or have such an honest and open conversation about racism. I would not have been able to get the punks into the Church, that is for sure. However, where is there a better place to speak about violence, injustice and blame: the Courts, with their very human view of what justice and reconciliation are, or the media, with their overly sexualized and entertainment driven news copies? No, it is the Church. I wish American congregations would get past the immature arguments about what is "Christian" or "secular." We need to realize that Christians are called to relevancy defined not by clothing trends and musical genres, but by how we engage our culture and how we, the Christian congregation, is working to subvert and challenge the modern "Rome." It is the way of maturity and it is the audacity to think creatively that can affect the world, not the tired hum-drum of moral judging and "other-worldly" hope that seems to define Christian cultural engagement. So, if showing a movie with some swearing and sexual content opens up a conversation about hate, injustice, racism and violence, then I think it is O.K. to do so.