

March 7, 2010

TERMS OF SURRENDER

On September 11, 2001 I was called early in the morning by the local township police where we lived. I was the police chaplain and part of my job was to escort officers in notifying the next of kin of the sudden death of one their family members. This morning, September 11, I was asked to tell a mother and her four daughters that their husband and father had been killed in a car accident on his way to work. It's a visit no one wants to make. Daddy was healthy and happy one moment and he is gone the next. And it is unexplainable. After staying with the family for a while until other family arrived – the police officer drove me back to the church and as he dropped me off in the parking lot we both concurred that it wasn't likely to get any worse than this that day. Fifteen minutes later the first plane hit the first tower of the World Trade Center. By that evening the sanctuary of the church I served was filled to over capacity with people who did not know whether their loved ones were coming home. Nineteen from our town did not including three from our congregation.

Life is fragile and uncertain. A freak accident on the road and a diabolical attack from the air and those who thought they had their lives far in front of them found that death was on their doorstep. One just never knows.

Jesus knew.

Jesus knew that life had no guarantees. Bad things happen to good people. Good things happen to bad people. Healthy one moment, and in the hospital the next. Life is capricious.

It is the topic at hand when the subject of calamity gets brought before Jesus. Two current and tragic events. First Pilate has sent his thugs to restore order and the result is the indiscriminate slaughter of some Galileans. Innocents that got caught up in what might be called a terrorist attack. What also came up was a tragic event in Jerusalem when a tower – the tower of Siloam – fell into a crowd of people and the result was 18 people dead. One of those freak accidents. Random deaths with very little explanation.

One of the popular theologies of the first century was that there was no such thing as an accident. When you become victim – it must be your fault. Bad things happen to bad people.

If evil visits your life it must mean that you are a worse sinner than the rest. So Jesus gets asked about these events – and he takes the opportunity to hit head on what he saw as bad theology.

What about these Galileans? he asked. What about those who fell victim to the tower? Is it that they sinned more than the rest? Is it one of those deals where they got what was coming to them? And Jesus answers his own questions with an emphatic NO. No, he says, this was no punishment from on high. This was no divine quid pro quo. This was no judgment of God. In this world people die. Accidents happen. Bad things happen not just to bad people, not just to good people ... bad things happen to people.

And then, just about in the same breath, Jesus then says something surprising. Very surprising.

Given that life is uncertain. Given that death is capricious. Given that one never knows what the day will hold. Given all that, Jesus says, “Repent.”

Repent. “Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

The Greek word for repent is the word *metanoia*. Unless you *metanoia*, you will all perish as they did. The word means “Slam on the brakes. Come to a screeching halt. And do a U-turn.”

I experienced *metanoia* this week on my way to work. I was zipping down the road when up ahead I saw one of those construction guys with the “Stop/Slow” signs. As I was approaching him going about 40 miles an hour – I could see him putting his walkie-talkie up to his ear. It was his signal to turn the “Slow” to “Stop”. Without looking, however, and not seeing that I was nearly right on top of him, he stepped out into the middle of the street and turned the sign to “Stop”. I slammed on my brakes and missed hitting the guy by about 20 feet. But there he stood – in front of me with his sign that said, “Stop”.

So Jesus this morning stands in front of us – forcing us to slam on our breaks ... bringing us to a screeching halt – and he tells us *metanoia*. He does not tell us to “slow”. He tells us to *metanoia*. Slam on the breaks and do a U-turn.

Now Jesus stands in front of us with this *metanoia* sign because he knows something about us. And what he knows about us is that there is something inside each one of us that is

driving away from the Father. There is something inside each one of us that is driving away from the Father ... driving away from his grace, his love and his mercy. There is something inside each of us that wants life on our terms. We want to be in control. We want to do it our way. We want to be at the wheel. There is something inside each of us that is doing that. And we are driving away from the impassioned love of the Father. And what we are driving toward is life on our own terms ... and therefore a judgment on our own terms. We want to be judged on our own merit. We want to stand alone before our maker. And Jesus steps in front of us with his metanoia sign and does not say, "Slow down." Or "Take it easy." Or "Let up on the gas." He says, *Metanoia*. Slam on the breaks and do a U-turn. Because you do not want to stand on your own in the judgment.

But we are people on the run, aren't we? We are people in a hurry. We've got places to go and people to see. We have houses to manage, up north and down south. We have dinners to attend, children to educate, and books to read. We have trips to take and shows to watch. We are on the run. And we forget that what is chasing us is the love of God. The mercy of God. The grace of God. And Jesus says, that none of those things that we are running toward ... speeding toward ... have any merit.

The only thing that matters ... when all is said and done ... is whether you were loved by God.

So at his peril he stands in the middle of the road with his *matanoia* sign and says turn around and drive as fast as you can ... break every speed limit you can ... drive at the speed of light if you can ... toward the enveloping love of God. Let God love you. Let God embrace you. Let the love and sacrifice of the cross become your merit. Because the tree that bears no fruit will someday come down. But the Father says ... let's give them another chance. Let's invited them to repent. Let's invite them to stop running.

In the waning days of the Civil War when Lee's rebel army was on the run, chased by Grant's Army of the Potomac ... Lee had become aware of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address given a month earlier. The President had spoken in gracious terms. "With malice toward none; with charity for all," he said. Lee knew that the terms of surrender would be merciful. And so Lee gave up running. He gave up being chased. And he surrendered his army. Years later he said, "I surrendered as much to Lincoln's goodness as to Grant's army."

You know the truth of life is – that we are hounded by the goodness of God. Hounded by the mercy of God. Hounded by the loving kindness of God. And for some reason we keep running. We keep running until we see, if we ever see, the man in the road with the *metanoia* sign. And the sign says stop, but in another way it says, Surrender. Surrender not to an army ... not to defeat ... not even to fear. Surrender to the God who is chasing you with open arms – open as wide as the cross.

One of the great leaders of the 20th century Presbyterian Church was a good Scotsman by the name of George Macleod. Macleod was a leader among leaders in the Church of Scotland and became its Moderator. He led the effort to restore the historic Abby of Iona which now serves as a great place of pilgrimage for Christians around the world. He is considered one of the great saints of the Celtic tradition. But in the grand scheme of things - none of that mattered, Macleod would say, none of it mattered. What mattered was what had happened decades before when he was a young man and he volunteered to fight in World War I. He was sent with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders to the Western front where he witnessed the slaughter of his friends and comrades. He fell into despair – today we would call it Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. He began to drink heavily – and fell apart. He was, as he said, “Going to hell in a hurry.” On his way back to the front after a leave – not sure he would survive the random death of the front – he looked in front of him and there stood a man with a sign. A sign that said “*Stop*”. *Metanoia*. And so he stopped. The train kept rolling, but George

Macleod stopped and fell to his knees in the middle of the train car and he prayed that God's love would envelope him. That God's mercy would uphold him. That God's grace would fill him. He turned and ran in the direction of God's embrace. He survived the war and life never was the same again.

I don't know what's going on with you right now – but chances are you are running. I'm not sure what you're running toward, but it's likely the wrong direction. And if you don't think you're running, it's probably because you're running so fast you don't know you're running. But the man now stands before us in the road. *Metanoia*, he says. Time to surrender. Unconditional surrender. Into the goodness of God.