

“A Second Chance”

This is one of those weeks when writing a sermon I find very difficult to control my social and political emotions. I was neither surprised nor shocked by what happened at Virginia Tech because of my awareness of the mental health crises in this nation that few talk about and no one is doing anything about! While the current administration has us wound tight about Muslim terrorists from other countries causing havoc, the real threat to our nation are the number of “ticking time bombs” walking around receiving zero help because of the simplistic rational that they don’t currently present a threat to themselves or to others.

I speak with confidence because SueAnn and I have a family member in this situation right now! Then add on top of the mental illness crises, as well as the “drug and alcohol culture,” the fact that on average there is one firearm per 300 million Americans with the simplistic justification that guns don’t kill people, but people kill people. This is what I mean by “ticking time bombs.” I say enough with “idealism” ... lets have some “realism.” If what happened at Virginia Tech did not “enlighten” us to the overall reality of our social and culture crises, then God help us!

This brings me to the spiritual side of matters and the text from the Book of Acts, which I will introduce with this contemporary parable:

A young man in Japan arranged his circumstances so that he was able to travel to a distant island to study Zen with a certain Master for a three-year period. At the end of the three years, feeling no sense of accomplishment, he presented himself to the Master and announced his departure. The Master said, “You’ve been here three years. Why don’t you stay three months more?” The student agreed, but at the end of the three months he still felt that he had made no advance.

When he told the Master again that he was leaving, the Master said, “Look now, you’ve been here three years and three months. Stay three weeks longer.” The student did, but not with success. When he told the Master that absolutely nothing had happened, the Master said, “You’ve been here three years, three months and three weeks. Stay three more days, and if at the end of that time, you have not attained enlightenment, commit suicide.” Towards the end of the second day, the student was enlightened.

This parable reminds me of people who have tried Christianity, and can’t get it! The results are similar: they’ve had a bad experience with a minister or a church ... they tried to read the Bible, but stopped with the Book of Numbers ... they can’t fit a religious discipline in with their lifestyle ... they find religion boring or worst, irrelevant! And then ... WHAM! A tragic or traumatic event or what I call “the end of the second day.” We pause and ponder the whole meaning of life ... our life. We may have a few “wonderments!” We may even ask, “What is God telling me?” Daring to ask such a question as well as daring to seek the answer to such questions can lead to spiritual enlightenment.

Enlightenment is to wake up and discover you are alive! Enlightenment is having the shades lifted from your eyes and you suddenly see life much differently. We often refer to people whose mind operates in a fog as someone whose elevator is stuck between floors! We have had such experiences ... such days when nothing makes sense; everything goes wrong ... we walk into a room to get something, and we stand there wondering why we are in the room?

We work on a project that ought to take a half an hour, and three hours later we’re still trying to figure out how to put things back together ... that last nut that won’t turn ... that one screw that breaks. It is the same with faith. Sometimes the Bible, the sermon, the worship service just doesn’t make sense: “God what are you telling me! What’s the point! What’s the purpose?”

Enlightenment takes pursuit! You raise the questions ... you search long for the answers ... eventually the answers come. And when they come, you react somewhat like the little boy, who was devoted to TV’s “Sesame Street”, who woke his parents one early morning with a triumphant discovery, “Mommy, daddy! My pillow! It’s a rectangle!” Even the most difficult situations or problems, can resolve themselves with stunning simplicity and elegance, like “My pillow! It’s a rectangle!”

The Christian Faith is simpler than we make it. We approach believing with skepticism, doubt, and resistance. We need proof, and lots of it, before we risk looking foolish. We deal with our faith, much like we deal with our life --- with lots of resistance. We have a good example in today’s scripture lesson. Paul is like ourselves. Paul resisted the stories out of Jerusalem about a carpenter’s son from Nazareth named Jesus, who died and three days later rose from the dead, and appeared to many of his followers. Paul saw this as a clear case of insurrection on the part of people breaking away from the authority of the Temple. And so, Paul took up the cause of hunting down these Jesus followers, and putting them to death.

One such execution stuck in Paul’s mind. The stoning of Stephen, who uttered with his last breath, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Something about Stephen lingered in Paul’s mind and would not disappear. How could a bad person die like

that? In order to quiet his insistent doubt, Paul plunged into the most violent action possible. First he went from house to house in Jerusalem, and arrested every Christian he could find. This only made matters worse because once again Paul had to ask himself what secret these simple people had which made them face peril and suffering and loss with serenity and without fear. But Paul kept driving himself. He was on a one person crusade. He had heard that some Christians had escaped from Jerusalem and went to Damascus. He sought special permission to go to Damascus and bring them back for punishment. The road to Damascus passes through Galilee, and thoughts of Jesus' ministry in the region were more vivid.

Somewhere between Galilee and Damascus, Paul came face to face with the Risen Christ. Like a bolt of lightning, Paul was shocked into a new reality. The internal struggle which Paul was having was over in a flash. The long battle of resistance against believing that Jesus is the Christ was over. Paul's change was not so much a sudden conversion, as it was a sudden surrender. This great Pharisee from Jerusalem, who was going to enter Damascus like an avenging fury, was led by the hand, blind and helpless. We learn about the mystery of faith in what the Risen Christ says to Paul: "Go into the city, and you will be told what to do" Up to this moment Paul had been doing what he thought best, what his will dictated. From this time forward Paul would be told what to do.

Resistance versus surrender! Christians are people who have ceased to do what they want to do, and who begin to do what Christ wants them to do. A Christian takes seriously the question, "God, what would You have me do? Show me the way?" I believe such prayer. In the scriptures, the "heavenly light" (*Isaiah 60:1*) is a familiar symbol for the divine presence. When we seek to be enlightened ... when we pursue understanding, then we see ... then we know! Our tendency is to avoid, resist, ignore, pretend, and be defensive when it comes to dealing with our faith questions. Not all changes are necessarily as dramatic as Paul's. Sometimes they are gradual. But in either case, the need to surrender rather than to resist is all important!

When I was in college wrestling between believing and not believing; between changing from Baptist to Presbyterian, the story about Martin Luther was enlightenment to me. In the fall of 1510, Luther made a pilgrimage to Rome. He went not only for the sake of his own soul, but also for the souls of his family and friends. Luther went to the Scala Santa, the great sacred stairs near the Lateran Church, the real mother church of Roman Catholicism. The stairs had been set leading to a room that held relics of the saints. For every step climbed, Pope Leo IV had granted an indulgence of nine years.

There were 28 steps. The devout believed that by climbing these steps on their hands and knees they would gain spiritual favor. For the monk Luther, who had walked the pathway of penitence for five years, climbing these steps, hand over hand, knee following knee, held the promise of sins forgiven, burdens lifted, a soul set free. At the 28th step, however, something happened to Martin Luther. God's spirit intervened and Luther's mind took precedence over his emotions. He questioned: "Who knows whether this be so?" He had come to Rome a devout celebrant of the Church and he left in no less a state, but what he saw and felt, especially a Rome utterly abandoned to money and luxury, would ultimately focus his mind on a new course.

A new light began to dawn within Luther, a light that grew brighter and brighter as he took up the pastoral duties of a parish priest in the village of Wittenberg. In October, 1517, ten years after his "28th step experience" in Rome, Luther's enlightenment was complete as he posted at the village church his famed 95 theses, thus ushering in one of history's great periods of enlightenment --- the Protestant Reformation!

Paul's light came on the Road to Damascus ... Luther's light came on the 28th step of the Scala Santa ... my light came on when after four years of college when I stopped arguing with myself between believing and not believing, and asked God to show me the way. I gave God a window when I applied to two seminaries: Eastern Baptist Seminary in Philadelphia and a Presbyterian seminary in Pittsburgh. I was surprised when I, a Baptist, received a scholarship to Pittsburgh. I went to Pittsburgh Theological Seminary for three years and, as some faculty will tell you, I still resisted. Such resistance resulted in being the last person in my graduating class to find a church. After being evicted from our seminary apartment and living with SueAnn's parents for what seemed like an eternity, I prayed for Divine intervention ... God's answer led me to Boyds and fortunately, the denomination forgot I was here!

Nearly every religion sees its converts as pilgrims embarked on a journey toward some new plane of existence. Luke, in his book called Acts, is fond of using the image of a journey as a metaphor for what it feels like to be a follower of Christ --- a Lord who takes us from where we were to a new place we could not have gone without His call ... His leading. That is my experience! Therefore, I encourage you to review your own life in terms of this faith journey. When have you felt God's tug? Where have you felt God's leading? And as we move away from Easter, let us challenge ourselves by asking: "God, what would you have me do with my life?" Also, let us challenge ourselves as a church by asking: "God, where would you have us serve?" Perhaps after three years, three months, three weeks, but certainly no longer than two days ... perhaps then we'll know the answer!