

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST in SIMI VALLEY
Second Sunday in Lent - March 7, 2004
Anne G. Cohen

Luke 13:31-35

For Our Reflection:

Good and evil coexist and are blended. Each modifies the other.

- William Newton Clarke, The Christian Idea of God (1909)

I've learned that we are responsible for what we do, no matter how we feel. (Age 51)

I've learned that you can't be a hero without taking chances. (Age 43)

- Live and Learn and Pass It On

compiled by H. Jackson Brown, Jr. (pp.90 & 15)

Binding Contracts

There are three things that my father told me to remember as I went off to college in Ohio. Actually, the first thing he told me long before that. But my memory likes to lump them together because, essentially, they are all the same thing. Three things to remember:

One: Dive into the wave;

Two: Turn into the skid; and

Three: Run toward the train.

There was a fourth thing about how Carnegie was pronounced CarNEgie, not CARnegie. But that's a whole different category of advice.

Dive into the wave. If you're swimming in the ocean and you're fighting the waves, they will catch you up, tumble you down and slam you onto the beach. Dad advised us to face the waves and, when they tower over you, dive into them. It was phenomenal. If we could bring ourselves to do it, we came up on the other side - unscathed and ready for the next one.

Turn into the skid. In Ohio, it snows. So my father wanted his California girl to know what to do if I was driving a car (for some unknown reason) and the car started to fishtail on ice. Turn into the skid and you'll straighten out. Darned if he wasn't right.

Run toward the train. In Ohio there are lots of railroad tracks and many of the intersections in the countryside are unmarked. His advice was to look both ways before crossing. Oh, and by the way, if your car gets stuck on the tracks, get out of the car and run toward the train.

His reasoning was that, when the train hit the car, the debris would mostly fly forward and sideways. Running the opposite direction from the debris - toward the train - was safest - as long as you stayed off the tracks.

All of these bits of wisdom served not only to keep me safer in a hazardous world - but also taught me some of the laws of physics. There are certain things in Nature that are predictable. And if you know what those are, you are more likely to survive into adulthood. And the reason it was important for my father to TEACH these things to his children was because they were COUNTER-INTUITIVE.

When I see an oncoming Tsunami my reptilian brain screams, "Run, fool! You're gonna die!" It takes an act of will from the cerebral cortex to force my body to face the wave and dive into it. When my car fishtails, I have to think before turning the steering wheel. Turning toward the direction I do not wish to go is NOT a natural response. And running toward an oncoming train would never occur to me - unless I understood trajectories.

The laws of Nature or physics are binding contracts between living beings and our Maker. We are mortal, we will die. If we wish to live any length of time, we abide by these contracts or suffer consequences. The laws of physics are not completely known, but they appear to be non-negotiable - and, therefore, physically binding.

There are similar laws that govern the mind and emotions - and others that are binding to our spirit. Even less is known about these. But we are learning more and more about the consequences of ignoring some of those laws - even if we don't know what they are. "Ignorance of the law is no excuse. You still pay the price."

One of these laws is similar to the three things my father told me to remember. We have discovered that the human psyche contains the potential for both evil AND good. Depending on life experience, choices made and body chemistry, we tend toward one or the other. And if we ignore our negative tendencies and negative experiences - and suppress our negative emotions - those negative tendencies, experiences and emotions will take on a life of their own within us. We will act out the things we will not consciously acknowledge.

Carl Jung discovered this law of mental and emotional health: "Face your demons." If you've ever been chased by a monster in a dream - you may have discovered that by turning and facing that monster, it becomes more benign. I had repetitive dreams for 25 years about plane crashes. But once I learned how to communicate with and partner the pilot of

whatever plane I was on, the dreams became adventures in flight rather than disasters.

We can apply a similar law of encounter to our spiritual life. I believe it is this spiritual law that Luke's version of Jesus was applying in the text read this morning. In Luke 13:31 Jesus is warned by religious leaders to avoid Jerusalem because the Roman ruler seated there had it in for him. Jerusalem was crawling with Roman soldiers. It was the seat of political, military and religious power. Jesus had a habit of critiquing those institutions - making himself a target. So, of course, Jerusalem would be a dangerous place for him.

But Jesus doesn't run away. His spiritual contract, which may have been negotiable but appears here to be binding, is to turn and face the monster chasing him, to run toward the train and dive into the wave. His calling was to heal, protect and speak truth to power. And he had to do these things in the places where healing, protection and truth were needed.

Luke's Jesus uses the image of a chicken to describe his sense of calling and the work he longs to do in Jerusalem.

How often have I desired to gather your children together
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.

Even a CHICKEN doesn't run from danger and leave her chicks for the fox. She gathers them under her wings, faces the fox and then - whatever happens, happens to HER first. The spreading of protective wings is an image directly from the Psalms - describing God's sheltering Presence:

...hide me in the shadow of your wings
from the wicked who despoil me. (17:8)

...in the shadow of your wings I will take refuge
until the destroying storms pass by. (57:1)

Let me abide in your tent forever,
find refuge under the shelter of your wings. (61:4)

In Luke's text, the protection that Jesus wants to provide for the people of Jerusalem is Divine protection. It is self-sacrificial - but, most of all, it takes place in the very face of what threatens them. When one has a prophetic calling, turning your back is not an option. Standing in the presence of power, of hatred and injustice is part of a binding contract with one's own soul. Confrontation of evil - with the

good - is the only option.

In 1998, Matthew Shepard was beaten, tied to a fence, and left to die in Laramie, Wyoming. Shepard was gay and his attackers quoted scripture as a justification for torturing and killing him for that. At his funeral, some protesters planned in advance to stand across the street with placards that expressed hatred for Matthew. Wanting to protect the Shepard family and friends from this emotional abuse, Matthew's friend Romaine Patterson organized a group of people to wear huge angel wings and stand in a silent circle around the protesters. Their wings blocked the sick messages of hatred, violence and intolerance.

(adapted from Seasons of the Spirit Lent/Easter 2004 p.24)

In order to be effective, the wing bearers had to stand WITH the hate bearers - on the same ground - up close and personal. My first instinct would be to surround the endangered family - not the protesters. But to effectively stop the damage from being done, the wings had to be close to the signs. This is a counter-intuitive act. It is a powerful act. It is a necessary act for those who would redeem and heal the human soul.

Dive into the wave.

Turn into the skid.

Run toward the train.

Turn and face the demon.

Stand and confront evil with good.

These are a few of the binding contracts that we have with our Maker.

If we choose to break these contracts, the consequences are dire and unholy.

If we choose to abide by these contracts, we find ourselves standing on holy ground - facing the next Tsunami - surrounded by the wings of a most gracious and loving God.

Bulletin

WE GATHER FOR PRAYER AND CELEBRATION

Music for Gathering

Welcome and Perspective on the Day

Musical Preparation for Worship - A Time for Centering

+ Call to Worship (unison)
All shall be Amen and Alleluia.
We shall rest and we shall see.
We shall see and we shall know.
We shall know and we shall love.
We shall love and we shall praise.
Behold our end which is no end.

+ Opening Hymn My Life Flows On Hymnal # 476

+ Opening Prayer (unison)
Gentle me, Holy One,
into an unclenched moment,
a deep breath, a letting go of heavy expectancies,
of shriveling anxieties, of dead certainties,
that, softened by the silence,
surrounded by the light and open to the mystery,
I may be found by wholeness, upheld by the unfathomable,
entranced by the simple, and filled with the joy that is you.

+ Our Common Prayer (unison)
Creator God who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,
on Earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts
As we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the kingdom and the power
And the glory forever. Amen.

Time for Silent Reflection

One: My soul waits in silence.

All: God is my rock and my fortress. I will be at peace.

Silent Reflection

The Assurance of Good News (unison)

God is the Source of our Wholeness. Blessed be God!

Sung Response "Hallelujah. God be praised!" (CSB #5 Refrain)

We Offer Our Gifts So That Our Lives May Be Our Prayer

Offertory

Offering Prayer (unison)

O love ever burning and never extinguished charity

My God set me on fire. Amen.

WE TEACH, REFLECT AND PROCLAIM

Just Peace Moment Youth "Bowling for Columbine"

Conversation with Our Children

Reading from the Christian Gospels Luke 13:31-35

Sermon Binding Contracts

WE RESPOND TO GOD'S INVITATION

Celebration of Holy Communion

+ Communion Hymn I Come With Joy Hymnal #349 (vv.1,3,5)

Invitation

Sharing the Bread and the Cup

Communion will be served to you as you remain seated. Please wait until all have been served before eating the bread - and again before drinking the cup - to signify our unity with one another and with all who eat and drink at God's table this day.

Prayer of Thanksgiving (unison)

We give thanks that through the sharing of this bread and cup we find ourselves at table with those of every age who feel the Universe filled with the Spirit of God, who love and serve justice, who have been touched by God's loving and compassionate hands. Sustain us with these gifts that our hearts and spirits may be strengthened by Your presence. Amen.

Intercessions, Celebrations and Encouragements

Call to Prayer Be still and know that I am God Hymnal # 743

Time for Silence

Our Joys and Concerns and an Offering of Prayer

Sung Response In Solitude Hymnal #521 vv. 1 & 2

+ Sending Hymn Sent Forth By God's Blessing Hymnal # 76 v.2

+ Commissioning (unison)

Goodness is stronger than evil;

Love is stronger than hate;

Light is stronger than darkness;

Life is stronger than death;

Wholeness is ours through The One who loves us.

+ Sung Response (we gather in some semblance of a circle) Hymnal #433 v.3

In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;
In our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

+ Postlude

WORSHIP NOTES

Call to Worship is by Saint Augustine from An African Prayerbook (p.31)

Opening Prayer is by Ted Loder, Guerrillas of Grace (p.17)

Offering Prayer is by Saint Augustine from An African Prayerbook (p. 8)

Commissioning is by Desmond Tutu, Ibid. (p. 78) adapted