

Playing the Ball Where It Lies

Acts 16:6-10

“We know that God works all things together for good, for those who love God and are called according to his purposes.” (Romans 8:28)

A sermon preached by Rev. David Handley
at the First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville, TN

June 22, 2012

Scripture Introduction:

As we continue our summer sermon series from the Book of Acts, we pick up the drama on the Apostle Paul’s 2nd missionary journey around the year 50 A.D. He and Silas are traveling through Asia Minor, what we now know as Turkey. Luke, the narrator, describes an historic quantum leap in the spread of Christianity as Paul and Luke jump continents from Asia to Europe, and the world would never be the same.

But where we pick up the story today, back in Asia Minor, Paul seems to be having a rough time of it—bouncing from one town to another, one province to another, his own plans being thwarted by frustrating circumstances, and at last finding an open door in the last place he ever would have thought of going. You will notice Luke describing the situation as “The Holy Spirit forbidding Paul to speak the word” in one province; and then “the Spirit of Jesus not allowing” Paul to speak the word in another.

They finally end up in Troas, a port city on the Aegean sea, near the ancient city of Troy. It was there that Paul had a dream late at night. A Greek man from across the Aegean was beckoning Paul to “come over and help us!” (Greece is referred to as “Macedonia” in this reading.) It is here that Luke changes the genre in telling the tale, and “they” becomes a “we.” “Then,” writes Luke, “*we immediately tried to cross over to Greece,...*” It would seem that it was here in Troas, Paul’s last choice, that he met up with Luke “the beloved physician” who was so important to Paul the rest of his life, and of course important to us through the Gospel and the Book of Acts he gave us. Let us listen for the word of God....[Read Acts 16:6-10]

“Playing the Ball Where It Lies”

The home where I grew up in small town Indiana rested on the 17th tee of quite a good 18-hole golf course. One would think that, by such a providential placement, I might have ended up on the PGA circuit instead of the preaching circuit. But here I am; and the fact is, my golf career was inglorious, to say the least. W.C. Fields used to say that golf was “a terrible

way to ruin a good walk.” I agreed with that. When I was a kid, I could never figure out why President Eisenhower used to say he played golf because it was “relaxing.” For me golf was anything but relaxing. Frustrating, demoralizing, rage-inducing...yes. But “relaxing”?! Not the way I played the game. I had the dubious reputation on the LaPorte High School golf team as the only one who could throw his driver further than he could hit the ball.

Every Spring one of the arguments my older brother and I would have was whether we were going to play “summer rules” or “winter rules.” My brother, the family legalist, insisted we had to play summer rules; in fact there was no such thing as “winter rules;” you find that nowhere in golf manuals. “You’ve got to play the ball where it lies,” Dick said. But then, brother Dick always colored between the lines as a kid too; what could be duller than that?! But I was convinced that the gods of the green links were out to get me. My ball always seemed to end up in someone else’s divot, or under a tuft of grass. If I could just roll it over in the grass, prop it up a little bit, then I could get a nice clean wood shot and I’d be home free. But “No,” he said, “you’ve got to play the ball where it lies.”

It strikes me that life is a little bit like that. We start out life on the first tee; we have this broad fairway stretched out before us, and a clean score card. For the first three or four holes, we might get a par or (on my level) consistent bogies, and we begin to get visions of pulling into the clubhouse at the end of nine with an even par. But in life, as on the links, about the fifth or sixth hole, something always happens to mess it up. We slice the ball into the sand traps of failed plans we have made; or we don’t use quite enough club and splash into the water holes of office politics or romantic heartbreak. We might really get hold of the ball but we transgress the boundary markers of morality. And we drag ourselves back into the clubhouse brooding, “If only we had done this instead of that; if only we had used this club instead of that one; if only I had not gotten too eager and taken my eye off the ball....” If only; if only; if only. Suffering either makes one bitter or better. And clearly sometimes, when we are at our lowest points, our lives seem to be melodramas of regret and bitterness.

The Apostle Paul had an incredible ability to “play the ball where it lies.” Paul had a vision as big as the world; and plans to bring that vision into play. He planned to go into Ephesus, a great center of pagan worship, the capital of the province of Asia. But something prevented him from getting there. “*The Holy Spirit forbid them to go into Asia,*” as Luke put it (Acts 16:6). Not to be daunted, the Apostle and his partner Silas went with Plan B and tried to get into the province of Bythinia, a leading area of influence. Something else got in the way. Luke simply says, “*...but the Spirit of Jesus prevented it.*” New Testament scholars speculate as to what that may have happened. It may have been an illness that laid him low, some “thorn in the flesh” that was buffeting him. It could have been the merchants of Ephesus who made a good living on making little silver idols of Artemis, the goddess of Ephesus. We don’t know; all we know is Luke’s interpretation which, one would assume, he got from Paul himself. It was the Holy Spirit who was changing Paul’s Plan A to become God’s Plan B. What was it about Paul’s faith in God that gave him this resilience to go on; when his plans were thwarted, not to be discouraged?

We get a hint in Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 8 verse 28. Paul was undoubtedly drawing from his own experience with God’s working in his life when he said, “*We know that God works all things together for good, for those who love God and are called according to his purposes.*” Do you think that is true?

Many of you here today know this promise; you may even have committed this verse to heart. Because you have seen countless times over the years when this has proven true. You had a health crisis that you would never want to go through again; You had a failed marriage that was just a nightmare; you had a business partner cheat you or take advantage of you; you had a child that had all kinds of struggles that just broke your heart. At the time, you wanted to curse God; but later on, with the 20/20 vision of retrospect, you found there was a positive result in it you never could have known at the time. You probably wouldn't say that God caused the bad, brought the trauma; I certainly wouldn't say that. But you would agree that "*through* all things," though God does not *cause* all things, God can still work for the good, bring good out of evil.

However, there are others here today who have no such healing retrospect. What happened to you, or a loved one, was just plain awful. Period. End of story. This is not lack of faith; it's just calling it what it is. No explanation for it, in the light of a good, loving, and sovereign God. Any effort at simplistic rationalizations is like salt in an open wound.

Today, on this day of national mourning, lurking behind all of this are the horrific events that unfolded Thursday night at the Century Theatre in Aurora, Colorado. 12 innocent victims, most of them young people including one 6-year-old girl, shot down in cold blood. 58 wounded, some still hanging onto life by a thread. Such things test our faith to the core.

Rabbi Kushner touched a nerve in us all, years ago, when he came out with his book "When Bad Things Happen to Good People." It was dedicated in 1978 to the memory of his young son, Aaron, who died at 14 of an incurable genetic disease. It is a beautifully compassionate and sensitive book. In light of his personal experience, one has to admire his courage in holding on passionately to his belief in a good and loving God. Yet, in the end, I cannot subscribe to his conclusion. He says, in so many words, "In the face of life's cruelty, one can either hold on to an all-powerful and sovereign God; OR to a good and loving One. But you can't have it both ways." In 1755, in the wake of the cataclysmic Lisbon tsunami that wiped out thousands on the coast of Portugal, Voltaire opined, "If God is God, then he cannot be good. But if God is Good, then he cannot be God."

Now that makes total sense...to the mind; it's logic is irrefutable. But can it feed the soul? Can it comfort those who mourn?

The Apostle Paul's experience, getting bounced around Asia Minor, suggests a Third Way. My guess is that it is this "third way" that the grieving families of these 71 victims, dead and injured, are holding onto for dear life. And that is to cry out to heaven... "MY GOD,

WHY?!!!”...Why?!...Why?! It is the way of the “why?”

Does that cry from those heartbroken families sound familiar? The heartbroken cry of the Son of God, to His heavenly Father: “*My God, my God...WHY have you forsaken me?!*” It is so instructive that Jesus never addressed the WHY? question. He never answered human suffering with a philosophical explanation. He answered it with Action--acts of Healing; acts of Compassion. But never tried to explain it.

Does not the very heartbreak itself assumes that our God IS sovereign? The Good News is that our God DOES intervene in our personal affairs. That is our great hope; that is why we pray!...And that is why our hearts break, and our faith is shaken.

But when we experience the unspeakable, the anguish, the cruelty of life,...that very WHY?! also assumes that God is good!! And that stubborn faith that endures through all the questions is what overcomes the world. Jesus said it, “*In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good courage: I have overcome the world!*” (John 16:33) You see, Logic has to answer every question. Jesus says, there are some questions that cannot be answered in this life, but I will show you a way to overcome: FOLLOW ME.

So, the crucial choice that is ours today is this: Will we let our unanswered questions immobilize us? Will we let our anger turn our hearts to stone? OR will we do what Jesus did, and say “*Even so, into Your hands I commit my spirit!*” This is the heroic act of life that softens our hearts, and sends us into the world to do His works of compassion for the grieving. This is the decision that changes the world.

In 1946, a Jewish psychologist named Viktor Frankl published the book *Man’s Search for Meaning*. It chronicled his experiences as an inmate in the notorious Dachau concentration camp of the Nazi’s. Scrawled on the wall of his barracks, one of his fellow prisoners had etched with charcoal: “I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining; I believe in love, when the world is filled with hate; I believe in God, even when he is silent.” This is the Faith that overcomes the world.

Alleluia! Amen.