



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: February 7, 2010

Going For the Gusto, Shannon White

Isaiah 6:1-13

I love going to movies. And about this time of year, between the announcement of the Academy Award nominations and the awards ceremony, I try and get to as many of the nominated films which I haven't seen, as possible. Last week I saw...Invictus... the story of Nelson Mandela and his efforts to heal the chasms remaining in post-apartheid South Africa. In the film, Mandela appeals to the South African Rugby team to reach beyond what seemed possible for them that year... to win the 1995 World Cup. The hope was that their victory led by team captain, Francois Pienaar would unite their country in a common cause and rise above the deep divisions of racial hatred.

During the movie, I scrambled in the dark to find a pen and piece of paper, scribbling down the words spoken by Nelson Mandela (played by Morgan Freeman) to Francois Pienaar, the Rugby team's captain (played by Matt Damon). Mandela is quoted as saying, "In order to build our nation, we must all exceed our own expectations." So profound and so relevant...so universally true on so many levels.

The word "invictus" means unconquered in Latin. It's also the name of the poem by Englishman William Ernest Henley.

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

Henley wrote the poem in 1875 after his leg was amputated from the knee down when he was in his 30's...a byproduct of tuberculosis in the bone. It was his way to say the difficult circumstances of his life would not conquer him. That poem was also Mandela's solace while he was imprisoned in South Africa for 27 long years.

Hold that thought for a few minutes, while I talk about another concept.

I was listening recently to a recording of a talk by a Canadian business leader. He had somehow managed to organize a summit bringing the Dalai Lama together with billionaire Richard Branson along with authors such as Stephen Covey (The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People) and many other leaders in the personal growth industry...did you know that there was such an industry? When asked what characteristic it was which all of them shared...the organizer, Greg Hasbrit, said it was... "Engagement"...they are all intimately engaged with life... they are connected to others in their lives, they give back to society, they are committed to being the best they can be and they are aware. Aware of themselves and the people and circumstances around them. They are conscious human beings. We have many people in this congregation who are engaged on that level.

You might say the prophet Isaiah was also fully engaged. The story of his calling to ministry was during a turbulent period somewhere around 740 BCE. King Uzziah of Judah was dying. In the meantime, a major conflict between the alliance of Syria/Israel (Ephraim) and Judah arose. It was all over resistance to Assyrian expansion in the region. The Assyrians desired to overthrow the King of Judah.

The prophet sees a vision...a sort of heavenly vision...filled with winged seraphs, billowing smoke and the Lord himself sitting high on a throne. And after what must have seemed no less than an overwhelming experience, our version of the scripture says Isaiah responded, "I am lost"...but it can also be translated as "he was brought to silence." In the face of this otherworldly experience, not unlike Moses and the burning bush...Isaiah realizes the fullness of his humanity as he stands in the face of God. He sees himself for who he really is...gifted and flawed...and he humbly confesses, "I am a man of unclean lips." And God's response? God fully receives him, knowing fully who he is and what he is and he forgives him...and then issues this famous calling... "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" To which Isaiah has no other response than "Here am I, send me."

In the face of intense political turmoil, Isaiah raises his hand without reservation, because he knows he must "exceed his own expectations." He goes for it without hesitation because he has had and experience of the holy. He has had an experience of uncompromising acceptance and extravagant grace...and he responds with the only words he can utter "Here I am."

Tony Campolo, once said, "Most people tip toe through life only to arrive at death's door safely."

Helen Terkelsen, Director of Pastoral Counseling and Pastoral Care in Fall River, Massachusetts, and seminary professor at Andover Newton Seminary, would agree. She thinks people look beyond what's in front of them.

“We may feel that we suffer less if we don't let ourselves focus clearly on the world about us with its tragedies, its inhumanities, its social injustices, and even the unhappiness which challenges us to do, or which may be an inconvenience. If you have ever been high up in a tall building or flying on a clear day, remember how beautiful the city and the countryside look for miles around. And at night, with all the lights twinkling below in myriad colors, the city looks like fairyland and the light lays like a string of diamonds across the black velvet of the night. But seen during day close at hand, it can be quite different; city and country squalor and poverty, brutality, and hurt, - all these shock us and demand something of us if we have clear vision. You know, your own black and blue spots do not show from a distance or in dim light but they hurt just the same. Laundry flapping the breeze doesn't reveal its tattle-tale gray a block away or even close if you have on dark glasses.

For what one does not see clearly, he or she feels little guilt and no sense of shame. I think of the story frequently told when labor relations were tense between miners and mine owners. The owner of a number of mines in Pennsylvania used to ride from one mine to another in his private railroad car. When he went through a village near one of the operations, he would have the porter pull down the window shades because, he told a friend, the sight of these mining villages and camps depressed him.

If one sees men as trees walking, men are more of a commodity than a brotherhood of the sons and daughters of Almighty God. In the labor market they are often figured as the machines are figured. In the military, they are too often expendable cannon fodder in a non-Christian country (we like to think) where God's-eye view is nonsense. At best, to the half blind, they are part of the blurred landscape, things and animals to be tolerated or used for one's purpose.”

I know what she's talking about. By now everyone has heard the pleas for help and seen the haunting pictures of faces of survivors and the mounds of rubble left in the wake of the devastating earthquake in Haiti several weeks ago. The requests for money, food, and medical supplies have been urgent, and many have answered the call to help. The needs are enormous and people from around the globe will need to continue to answer that call for some time as the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere looks ahead to its future.

Such needs in the face of massive loss can leave some of us stunned and paralyzed, including myself. The miles allow us to be somewhat detached, unable or unwilling to take on such incredible sorrow into our already full lives. How can we take in any more? How can we care more? Can't we just rely on our Benevolence and Outreach Committee to send something on our behalf and be done thinking and caring?

But as members of the human family, we must dare to look and to feel...to be engaged... even if it is uncomfortable....to NOT see them as “trees walking” but as brothers and sisters who need our help and who have something to show us of the power of exceeding their own expectations.

That’s precisely what I see as I listen to the reports of the rescue workers and the survivors in Haiti. While the quake registering 7.0 may have left the people in mourning as they bury their fathers and mothers, their sons and daughters, and left their homes in ruin, what I see is a people of hope and resilience. People who are helping each other, they’re singing in the streets and praying. People waiting in long lines, in the hot sun for food which is sporadically delivered. Oh sure, there is some unrest and some violence, but that is the norm.

How can we widen our capacity to be more fully engaged to the needs around us? How can we exceed our own expectations?

To me it’s got to begin...like it did with Isaiah, with an experience of the holy. An utter overwhelming sense of the presence of God in our midst...an experience which strikes us dumb...just as it did with Isaiah...an experience so awe-producing and inspiring that we can do no other than to utter in simple truth who we are as frail human beings who make mistakes but who are willing to be of service.

One Haitian relief worker recently said, “I believe this is God’s way of saying to the world, ‘I want to see your humanity.’” After seeing the unbelievable support for Haiti ever since, Louis Elneus says, “People answered God’s call. God is now saying, ‘You have shown me your humanity.’ Now he’s asking the leaders in Haiti, ‘What are you going to do with all you’ve been given? Are you going to do nothing or are you going to make Haiti a more hopeful place for its children? There’s no reason to have so much suffering there.’”

What an invitation to love and grace...what an opportunity for engagement...to an unconquerable people.

I think...no, I know you and I can be more than we are right now. None of us has stopped growing...

I love the individuals in this church. You are gracious and kind and interesting and interested....and...I think this church can do and be more than it is right now. I’m not sure what that looks like...but maybe it begins by looking at what we expect from ourselves and how we are answering God’s call to us as individuals and as a congregation. In the face of the Holy, what is our response?

Maybe it continues with taking a look at how we view those sitting next to us...are we

really connecting with them and seeing them as men and women...who are people with joys and concerns who need our loving care?

How about our family members...spouses, children, parents, siblings? Are we fully engaged with them...seeing them as God sees them. When we hurt them...are we quick to go and mend those precious relationships?

And how are we viewing our neighbors and co-workers? Do we get annoyed easily or are we instruments of grace in their lives?

And how about the strangers...those we see on the street or on television...how do we embrace their needs and concerns?

They are holy questions...the answers tell how engaged we really are...

“I am the master of my fate...I am the captain of my soul...” we have the power to determine our response....Amen