



“Nothing Can Separate Us”

June 14, 2009

Romans 8:31-39

Last Sunday I focused on the 90th Psalm and its call for us to live each day to the fullest because life can end in an instant. I had no idea that within two days its truth would plough into us like a rushing avalanche.

This past Tuesday afternoon, I received a phone call from an officer with the West Chester Police Department, and as he talked, my heart began to sink. He said that two young men who had been kayaking in the Brandywine River had been spotted in distress and now were missing. He called the church because they had found Chad’s truck and his professional card stating he was a pastor at Westminster.

I told him that Chad’s brother from New York had come down for a few days so that they could spend some time together. I could hear Chad’s voice in my mind, joking as he loved to do. “Yes, Chris and I are going to do some manly things like hike and spit and cuss and kayak.” Followed by that loud, boisterous laugh of his.

The officer kept asking questions, and after I described Chris he said he would call back. I hung up the phone and prayed. “Please God, let them be all right.”

The next hour was a blur, I couldn’t focus on anything but Chad and Chris, hoping and praying that they were fine, but having a growing feeling that something awful might have happened.

An hour later the officer called back and asked me to come to the station. Camilla and I drove to West Chester with information for contacting the family, and I identified Chris.

The officer looked us in the eyes and said “I want to assure you that there is no hope of finding Chad alive. People on the bank saw both of them drown.”

It was around six o’clock, and through our tears Camilla and I talked about their parents, whose lives at that moment were happy, normal and fine. But we knew that within the hour their lives would be plunged into a darkness they could scarcely imagine.

The past week has been shocking and surreal. We all walk around saying, “Unbelievable. It’s unbelievable. But as sad and painful as it is for our congregation and staff, we cannot begin to imagine the depths of grief their family has experienced. “Nightmare” barely begins to describe the week they have had. And the fact that they could not locate Chad for several days only added to the misery. Thank goodness his body was found yesterday. At least that stress has been resolved.

Because of the nature of the tragedy that took Chad and Chris, our minds may have focused on frightening images. We must ask God to steer our minds away from these grim pictures and replace them with positive ones. We must visualize Chad flipping pancakes at Saturday Morning Breakfast or playing games with Vacation Bible School children. We must

picture Chris teaching his foreign students to speak English or getting together with friends for a fun evening of debate.

We cannot forget Chad teaching the confirmation class, preaching on Sunday morning, visiting in the hospitals and leading mission trips. Chris's family must remember him playing soccer and studying theology; discussing politics and the deep love he had for his dear wife, Nicole. All of us absolutely must recall the sound of their laughter; that contagious laugh that so often lifted our spirits and made our day brighter.

When Chad was interviewing for the Associate Pastor position here, he submitted a Personal Information Form in which he set out some of his thinking. One portion asked him to describe his leadership style. His response was vintage Chad. He wrote, "My leadership style ranges from 'Jesus loves you' to 'suck it up and get on with life.'"

For those who are hurting, for those who are beaten and broken, he was extraordinarily compassionate. He wanted people to know that God loves them, and frequently he served as that instrument of love. But there are other times when the thing we need most is a swift kick in the pants, and he was also prepared to administer love in that fashion.

Today, I hope all of us know in our souls that God loves us as a parent loves his/her children, that God always wants the best for us, and that nothing can break our ties with God. This day, God knows we need to grieve our loss, to support one another and to find healing in God's Spirit.

The second half of Chad's sentence is for another day. There will come a time when both he and Chris would want us "to suck it up and get on with life."

But first, we must be clear why this tragedy occurred. In one word: freedom. Human beings are free to make decisions about the course of their lives. Freedom is what gives life meaning. The freedom to choose between selfishness and generosity, between contempt and respect, between condemnation and forgiveness, between apathy and compassion makes a world of difference. Without freedom, we are mere puppets in the hands of God, and have no reason to get up in the morning. Without freedom to make decisions, life is drained of all purpose. Freedom keeps life from becoming drab and boring; it gives life vitality, sparkle and zip.

But freedom is also what causes much of our pain. Because God does not control our actions, life is filled with risks. We can make mistakes and get caught in dangerous situations. At one time or another each of us has used poor judgment. We have talked on a cell phone while driving or skied down a slope that was beyond our ability or stepped into the street without looking or taken our eye off our toddler or gotten too close to the edge. Most of the time it does not have a dire consequence, but when it does, it can be deadly. And the suffering of loved ones can be immense. We do not live within a protective bubble. Bad things happen. Water, that precious resource that makes life possible, can also become a deadly force.

I do not believe that God intended for Chad and Chris to drown. I do not believe that there is a divine plan that called for the death of two young men who still had so much good to do and so much love to share.

I *do* believe that when the turbulent waters pulled them under, God's heart was the first to break. It broke for Chad's and Chris' family who feel as if one of their limbs has been severed; it broke for all of their friends who now feel anguish and anger and a void within us; and God's pain is doubled because God not only feels our sadness, but knows all of the possible good they could have done in the coming years, that will not come to fruition.

The cross of Christ declares that God refuses to stand at a distance from us when we suffer. God is as close to us as the air we breathe and lightens the heavy weight of our suffering

by shouldering some of our pain and by drawing us together to support one another. When God's love flows among us we can bear greater burdens collectively than we can as separate individuals and so we must reach out to one another.

And there is more. The cross of Christ also declares that God's love is not vanquished by death. God loves us from the beginning; God loves us throughout our lives on earth; and God loves us when we pass from this physical realm and enter God's eternal kingdom. God loves us as a parent loves a child, and nothing we do can alter that fact. God's love for us never ends, because love is basic to God's nature. As the Letter of First John says, "God is love."

Chad and Chris were followers of Christ and passionate about their faith because they knew that God loved them and that Christ infused their lives with meaning. They knew that Christ called them each day to embark on a spiritual adventure that gave them a purpose and made their lives rich. But most of all, they knew that Christ gave them hope. They knew that in the face of indifference or injustice, selfishness or strife, danger or even death, nothing could separate them from God's love.

Because the lives of these young men ended much too soon, because they had so much more good to contribute to our lives and to so many others, it is incumbent upon us to honor their lives by the way we live ours. And fundamentally, that means clinging to hope regardless of how hopeless things might appear. It entails believing that darkness is never the ultimate victor, that despair is not an option and that death does not have the final word. God always has the final word, and that word is demonstrated in the resurrection of Christ. As Christ was raised to new life with God, we too, will be transformed when our earthly existence ends, so that we may live in God's eternal kingdom. The Resurrection window above us, shows Christ's outstretched arms, beckoning us to live with him eternally.

A theologian wrote a book shortly before he died that set out his basic beliefs. He wrote, "Life after death can no more be proved than disproved...As a child in a womb cannot conceive of life with air and light...it is hard for us to conceive of any other life (than the one we are living)...But consider this: If we are essentially spirit, not flesh; if we are spirits that have bodies and not the other way around, then it makes sense that just as musicians can abandon their instruments to find others, so at death our spirits can leave our bodies and find other forms in which to make new music."¹

Chad and Chris died far too soon and much too suddenly, so our intense grief will not end quickly. However, if we look to God for strength and to one another for support, the pain will diminish over time. For some of us the vacuum in our hearts will remain, but we must not let it destroy us. We must cling to the best memories of these two brothers and their vibrant spirits, and honor their lives by the way we live. And we must always live with hope, looking forward with anticipation to a future reunion with them.

NOTES

1. William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p.171.