



This past Thursday night, there was what we call an ecumenical gathering for worship. We don't often intermix for such a thing, since most of us children of God, whether Lutheran or otherwise, tend to be creatures of habit. We usually prefer staying to our own church homebase, going to our usual weekend time for our spiritual fill-up of sorts, not to mention ensuring we get to our holy pew that has been ours in this

sanctuary or that chapel for decades. But every once in a while, every once in a great while, we might just cave into the novel art of being different, and many did this past Thursday night at a Catholic parish in Rocky River, amidst the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity that concludes this weekend.

Sometimes for such a different worship with an intermixing of God's children, sometimes there's a bit of added pressure to the one who gets to preach for such an occasion. First of all, there's quite a bit of other clergy in the room, many of whom have their own staunch ideas of how proclaiming the Gospel should go. And not only that, but usually there are a few bishops in the room, too. No pressure whatsoever. And you almost have this subconscious feeling that you must convince the people who dared to try something different: that it was worth their precious time and dedicated effort to do so. The preacher might just feel that they have to come up with a story that will jolt the collective assembly enough to, at least spiritually speaking, knock them to the ground, perhaps rather similar to the account we heard about Paul, who gets blindsided not just by Jesus Christ, but gets blindsided by grace and hope and new life, even to the one who thought he had the faith journey all figured out.

So, the story I heard that night that has stuck with me ever since, is one about a group of chaplains: chaplains who are called to serve in hospitals and prisons and care facilities as well as with the military, and must be able to minister to the full gamut of all the differences in the faith journey. The chaplain must be willing to minister to those who make the trek to the same sanctuary or chapel at the same time every weekend, including to the same pew every time; and treat those precious creatures of habit just the same as those who can't remember the last time they set foot inside a church building. The chaplain must be willing to love those who profess a belief in God rather different than their own. The chaplain must be willing to serve the one whose words and actions differ rather differently than their own. The chaplain must be willing to be the embodiment of grace and hope and new life, no matter who is on the receiving end; rather similar to the often overlooked Ananias in the story of Paul's conversion.

So, back to the story that has stuck with me these last few days. It is about four overlooked chaplains, who served on a US Army Transport ship called the *Dorchester* in World War II. On a cold February night in the north Atlantic, carrying over 900 people, and only about 150 miles from its destination, a German submarine spotted it and launched a torpedo that killed scores of them instantaneously, and leaving no power to send out a radio distress signal. Further pandemonium ensued, as the rest tried to get on lifeboats to safety. And then there were the chaplains: Lt. George Fox, a Methodist; Lt. Alexander Goode, a Rabbi; Lt. John Washington, a Roman Catholic Priest; and Lt. Clark Poling, a Dutch Reformed minister. They all spread out trying to give some sense of calm, directing others to safety, tending to some of the wounded.

Once topside, the chaplains opened a storage locker and began distributing more life jackets. [As the story so goes,] When there were no more to give, the chaplains simultaneously removed theirs and gave them to four frightened young men. Of course, when giving their life jackets, Rabbi Goode did not call out for a Jewish man; Father Washington did not call out for a Catholic; nor did Fox or Poling call out for a Protestant. They simply gave their life jackets to the next one in line. One survivor would later say, "It was the finest thing I have seen or hope to see this side of heaven."

It's one of those stories that comes rather close to Paul being knocked to the ground in awe of Christ, in awe of grace and hope and new life. Sometimes amidst our creaturely habits or even for those who venture into being different, sometimes it is an immense struggle to find such stories that knock us to our spiritual core; as if chaos and evil and hatred are just standard operating procedure now for our humanity. And yet, God insists otherwise. God insisted otherwise to Paul, who did his fair share of all the above. Grace still managed to blindside him. Hope was brought to life in an overlooked Ananias, and it's still happening in numerous overlooked children of God all around the world, all of whom believe that this Gospel is meant for all to enjoy. Somehow, someway, God insists stories of new life are still being orchestrated to this day. And when we hear of such a story that manages to reach the depths of our soul, the Holy Spirit will not rest until we share it with others who need their blessed reassurance too: as if the Gospel still remains across all expressions of our faith; that nothing can happen in this life to separate us from the love of God, in Christ Jesus, the Lord of us all. So, for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

[Chaplain Corps History: The Four Chaplains | Article | The United States Army](#)