

The Four Chaplains
Sermon Rev. Rachel Thompson
Bedford Presbyterian Church
24 May 2013

Scripture John 15:12-13

‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.’

When I was first at Bedford Presbyterian Church, 11 years ago, I found that there was a group of long-timers, and I mean LONG timers who were either born in Bedford or came here as young adults and had attended this church forEVER. I began having lunch with these ladies about once a month, and one of the things I enjoyed most about that group was hearing stories of the past -- Bedford Village in the olden days, this church in the olden days.

One day we were talking about previous ministers and one of the ladies mentioned the Rev. Daniel Poling, who was the minister here from 1934 to 1940. They said that Rev. Poling was the brother of one of the revered Four Chaplains, who died during WWII. They said it as if they expected me to know the story, but at the time, I didn't. Since then I've learned the story, and this week thought it would be an appropriate one to tell on a Memorial Day Sunday.

This is the story of a ship called the Dorchester, which had started life as a coastal steamer, but when the United States entered World War II, was pressed into service as a troop carrier. In January of 1943, the Dorchester was on its way from New York Harbor to Greenland, carrying 900 men, and escorted by three Coast Guard cutters. All the way, the seas were heaving and the weather was bitterly cold, with gale-force winds. And to make things a lot worse, the route the ship was taking was reported to be heavily patrolled by German submarines. Because of this the Captain ordered the crew to be on a constant state of high alert, ordering the men to sleep in their clothes and even to wear their life vests while they were sleeping.

Traveling on the ship were four Army chaplains -- a Catholic priest named John Washington; a rabbi, Alexander Goode; and two Protestant ministers, George Fox and Clark Poling, the brother of BPC's minister, Daniel Poling. During the two weeks they were on the ship they did what chaplains routinely do. They held religious services for the men of their faith, they offered counseling and encouragement, they were even known to lead spontaneous singing from time to time. They also became, not only colleagues of different faiths, but friends with one another.

Shortly after midnight on February 3rd, 1943, off the coast of Newfoundland, a German submarine shot a torpedo into the side of the *Dorchester*. It exploded in the boiler room, causing huge damage, and destroying the electrical system. The ship went dark and started taking on massive water. Some of the men were killed by the impact of the torpedo. Others were trapped below decks and never had a chance. But hundreds of men were still alive and had a chance of survival if they had their life vests on and could make it into a lifeboat. Each life vest was equipped with a red blinking light so that people in the boats could see you to pick you out of the water. The life boats were equipped with flares.

The ship was listing dangerously and men were panicking as they scrambled toward lifeboats. The four chaplains had all survived the original blast and were up on deck, helping the men stay calm and make their way to life boats. The chaplains opened a storage locker, passing out lifejackets to those who didn't have them, and urging the panicked men to jump down to the lifeboats. It was a terrifying thing to let yourself drop over the side into the dark and icy sea, hoping that a life boat would be there to catch you. The temperature of the water was 34° F. But the chaplains reassured the men and gave them courage. The rabbi gave one of the men his gloves. The ship was rapidly sinking.

The chaplains ran out of lifejackets to give away and there were still men who needed them, so each one of the four chaplains took off his own life jacket and gave it to another man. They made sure that everyone who could, got off the ship. The four chaplains then stood on the deck, linked arms and prayed.

What happened next is described by one of the survivors, "As I swam away from the ship, I looked back. The flares had lighted everything. The bow came up high and she slid under. The last thing I saw, the Four Chaplains were up there praying for the safety of the men. They had done everything they could. I did not see them again. They themselves did not have a chance without their life jackets." Another survivor said that what the four chaplains did was "the finest thing I've seen or hope to see, this side of heaven."

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230 men survived, many of them due to the efforts of the four chaplains.

When the news of the *Dorchester* reached the country, the story of the Four Chaplains spread quickly. The story became a symbol for the nation of heroic courage and interfaith cooperation. The interfaith part of the story probably doesn't have the impact on us that it had in the 40s when bigotry toward Jews and animosity between Protestants and Catholics were rampant. As one observer of the chaplains' action pointed out, the rabbi didn't look for a Jewish soldier to give his life jacket to, nor did the others think about what faith they represented as they helped as many men as they could. In those last moments, they were all just compassionate men of God, helping others to live and sacrificing their own lives.

As I wrote on Facebook yesterday, I have a complicated relationship to Memorial Day. I abhor violence of any kind. I'm opposed to war. My prayers are always in the direction of peace. And yet I honor the service of those men and women who have gone to war to fight against tyranny and oppression. I find it difficult to comprehend how men like the Four Chaplains could summon up the courage to do what they did.

Could you have done that? Could I have done that? Every Memorial Day, I end up asking myself the same question. For what or for whom would I be willing to give my life? For my children, of course. I think we would all say that. But beyond that? I know that there are people we all know who have served in the military, or who have served as firefighters, or police officers. These are all people who have been willing to risk their own lives for the sake of others. There are some in this room this morning.

And so as we honor the Four Chaplains this morning, let's also honor those we have known who have put their lives on the line, perhaps even lost their lives, for other people. We'll take a moment of silence for each of us to remember in our own way.

I want to close with a paragraph I found about the chaplain we're connected to, the Rev. Clark Poling. This is from a website called www.fourchaplains.com by the way, in case you'd like to read more about them. Here's what it says about Chaplain Poling:

Clark V. Poling was the youngest of the Four Chaplains (he was 32) and the seventh generation in his family to be ordained. . . . When war came, he was anxious to go, but not as a chaplain. "I'm not going to hide behind the church in some safe office out of the firing line," he told his father. The elder Poling replied, "Don't you know that chaplains have the highest mortality rate of all? As a chaplain you'll have the best chance in the world to be killed. You just can't carry a gun to kill anyone yourself." So Clark Poling left his pastorate in Schenectady, NY, and enlisted as a chaplain. Just before he left for active duty, Clark asked his father to pray for him, "not for my safe return, that wouldn't be fair. Just pray that I shall do my duty. . . . and have the strength, courage and understanding of men. Just pray that I shall be adequate."ⁱ

He was more than adequate, wouldn't you say?

ⁱ www.fourchaplains.com