

THE BEST TO BE DONE

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In January of 1982, Air Florida Flight 90, attempting to take off from National Airport in Washington, DC, crashed into the 14th St. Bridge and sank into the Potomac River. Some of you remember this terrible air disaster. And we remember it likely because much of the effort to rescue survivors of the crash was caught on film. We saw it on the evening news as early as that evening – the rescue helicopter hovering over the icy waters of the Potomac searching for any remaining passengers possibly floating in the river. We might even remember Lenny Skutnik jumping from the banks of the river to save a woman desperately trying to swim to safety. And we also might remember the story of the sixth man. For as the rescue helicopter hovered above the icy waters they did in fact find six passengers still alive and treading water. They threw the life line to one of them ... a man, later identified as Arland Williams ... who handed it to a woman so that she could be lifted to life. They took her to shore and returned. They passed the line to the man again ... and again he passed it to a fellow passenger. They took it to him again ... and again he passed it. Three times they did this. Until finally the fourth time they returned and Arland Williams was not there. He had succumbed to the freezing depths. Arland Williams did not know any of the people he saved. One stranger helping another stranger. One human being helping another human being. Due only to some careful investigative work did we discover the identity of this sixth man—Arland Williams. So when they reopened the newly repaired 14th St. Bridge they renamed it the Arland D. Williams, Jr. Memorial Bridge.

As Roger Rosenblatt wrote after the crash – “he handed life over to a stranger ... *he* was the best we can do.”

The best we can do.

We do not know what was in Arland Williams’ mind or what was in his heart. All we know is that what Arland Williams did that day was the right thing. It was the best thing. And what likely racks each of our minds and hearts is the wonderment as to what we might do if found standing on the banks or treading the icy waters of such a river – and the fear that we might not do the same. Because we know that this truly is what it means to be human. This truly is what it means to reach the greatest extent of who we are. Greater love hath no person, than the one who lays life down for a friend. And even more for a stranger.

In the fateful conversation that Pontius Pilate had with the beaten and bleeding Nazarene rabbi in the Jerusalem Praetorium – there is so much that Pilate said that he didn’t know he was saying. He did not know what he was saying because he did not know who he was talking to. He spoke of kingdom, but he didn’t really know what kingdom was about. He spoke of truth, but he didn’t really know what truth was about. He spoke of power, but he didn’t really know what power was about. And so facetiously he pointed to the roughed up and pathetic Jesus and turned to the people and said, “Behold, the man!” And they all knew that he was mocking – and they all didn’t know that the one to whom he was pointing – was actually, really the man. The one on his way to the cross was the one who was showing anyone who cared to see – that this is the best to be done. This is what a man – or a woman – really is. Handing life over to a stranger. The good shepherd lays his life down for the sheep.

Our journey in this Lenten season is not simply to arrive at the point in which we gaze at the cross and empty tomb and take in God's love and power – though that is a lot of what we do. It is also to take in the greatest we can do. Behold the man! Behold what a man ... what a woman can do. It is within us. Jesus' life-giving is a life-giving for all and only one can do that. But our manhood and our womanhood can be a life-giving too. Not necessarily for all, but at least for one or two or twenty or a hundred. To be a person is to be a life-giver. It is the best to be done. Sometimes though we can forget that. Especially when life roughs us up a bit. We can lose sight of who we are. We can make the mistake to think that life is about survival and protection. No, says Pilate, not knowing what he was saying – Behold the man.

An old story from India is told of a man who was sitting under an old ancient tree whose giant roots meandered down into a swamp. While he sat there he heard a noise where one of the roots entered into the water. He looked closely and could see that a scorpion had become helplessly entangled in the roots. He got up from where he was sitting and balanced himself along the root down to where the scorpion was trapped. He reached down to try to pull it free. But each time he reached down to grab hold of the scorpion the scorpion would lash him with its tail, stinging him painfully. But he kept trying. And each time he would get lashed with the tail. Finally his hand had swelled so greatly he could not close his fingers. So he withdrew to the shade of the tree to wait for the swelling to go down. As he arrived at the base of the tree he saw a young man up on the road laughing at him. "You foolish old man," said the young man, "wasting your time trying to help a scorpion that can only do you harm." The old man replied, "Simply because it is the nature of the scorpion to sting, should I change my nature, which is to save?"

The world will sting us. That's a fact. The world has its icy waters. That's a fact. The world will rough up the best of us. That's a fact. But none of it changes the fact that there is a nature within us. There is a best still to be done. And if you should doubt it ... behold the man.