

UNDERGROUND STORIES

DR. STEPHEN D. MCCONNELL

ACTS 9:36-43

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There are some stories that won't stop being told. One never knows what all is going to happen between any two particular Sundays. Most of us were here worshipping last Sunday and when the service was over we made our way into the world to do the things we thought we were going to do. We did not know that the following day we would see News Alerts come across our televisions and smart phones telling us the sad news that bombs had been detonated at the finish line of the Boston Marathon. Two days later, we got news of the terrible plant explosion in West, Texas. The magnitude of these two events and the continued coverage of them were almost too much to comprehend and internalize. Many of us stay peeled to our TV's watching especially the hot pursuit of these criminal terrorists and the fear that struck at the heart of a great American city. Each of these events will be etched deeply into the history of these towns. The Boston Marathon of 2013 will take its place alongside of the midnight ride of Paul Revere. And yet more enduring than the headlines – because the headlines will soon go away – will be the stories that people will tell of what these events meant to them. The human stories. The “I was there” stories. The personal accounts. Strange how it goes – every tragedy has a timeline, a sequence of events but all that soon fades away, gets lost in time, and what becomes far more historical far more lasting are the stories, the life-changing stories, that help us to see how much we needed each other back then. You saw how those Watertown residents came pouring out of their houses after the crisis was over – and what were they doing – they were telling their stories. And how glad they were safe. How glad they had each other. How much they needed each other. It won't take long to forget the names of the perpetrators, but if you were standing at the finish line you won't forget how you helped each other. The great human capacity to love when love is needed. There are just some stories that won't stop being told.

I buried a businessman who was working on 9/11 in the World Trade Center. Witnesses say he stayed behind to help people get down the stairs. He was one of the 3000 that disintegrated in the rubble. He was the father of two toddlers. And for those two toddlers the history of 9/11 will be whittled down to

the story of their father. They will remember little about him except that he stayed behind to help. There are just some stories that won't stop being told.

Thornton Wilder in his great novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, writes about a terrible bridge collapse in Peru and the loss of five people who happened to be on the bridge when it collapsed. And the narrator of the story is a character who goes in search of the stories of the five people and what was it that led them to be on the bridge. And he discovers that each of them was either on the way to or from someone they had loved. Love was what bound them ... and as Wilder explains, love is what binds them to those who remember them. He ends the story by saying: "Soon we shall die and the memory of those five will have left the earth, and we ourselves shall be loved for a while and forgotten. But the love will have been enough; all those impulses of love return to the love that made them ... There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning."

It's a profound truth, isn't it? That if what the apostle says is right – that God is love. Then maybe the only thing that we can expect to remain from this world is the love we know from God. Cities come and cities go. Nations come and nations go. Even the record of tragedy and crisis comes and goes. Boston and West, Texas will someday go. Left to the ruins of time. But it is love that remains. The impulses of love return to the love that made them.

C.S. Lewis wrote once, "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit." And out of that it is only love – the love that comes from God – that remains.

On our recent trip last fall to Israel and Palestine with just about every stop we made to the Biblical sites we found that in most cases we were not standing where the Bible characters once stood – we were standing upon the layers of civilization that had been built on top of the places where the Biblical characters once stood. Twentieth century office buildings on top of first century Roman fortresses and Jewish synagogues. One strata of life on top of another strata of life, So why were we there? We were there because of the stories. It wasn't the building and streets that mattered. It was the stories. And the stories were a part of the great story of God's love.

Nowhere did I have this sense of things than when we visited the little town of Jaffa – a port city on the Mediterranean coast. Jaffa is a suburb of Tel Aviv – dwarfed now by the modern capital city. And Jaffa itself is a modern twentieth century town that has left behind no sign of its Biblical story, including even its name. For Jaffa is the old Joppa that scripture tells us about. But to walk through Jaffa is to have no idea that anything of ancient Joppa ever existed. That anything of historical or Biblical import had ever occurred.

And yet it is in Joppa, the Bible tells us, where there are stories still to be told.

The first is the story of Jonah. You remember the story of Jonah. Jonah the prophet who hears the call of God to go and preach to the wicked city of Nineveh. God wants to redeem Nineveh. He wants to heal their people and he wants Jonah to preach the good news of love and healing to them. But Jonah decides to run from the call and Joppa is where he grabs the first ship west. God wants to heal a city – but Jonah doesn't want any part of it. The Ninevites are just too immoral for God to be concerned about. Joppa is where Jonah decides that God's healing can only go so far. So Jonah has to learn the hard way that he couldn't be any more mistaken. God's grace and healing has no bounds and Nineveh is brought into the loving embrace of God. That's the first story. The first story inside the great story of God's love.

The second story of Joppa – the one I just read to you – is about a woman named Tabitha. A disciple of Jesus – devoted to good works and charity – but not immune to illness. She becomes sick and dies. A bad thing has happened to a good person. She dies. And when you're dead, you're dead. Nothing that God or anyone else can do about it. Not so fast, says the apostle Peter – who goes to her bedside and claims the office of healing. And by the mystery and power of the Spirit he invokes the same healing God who wanted once to heal the city of Nineveh ... he invokes the same healing God and he heals a dead woman. Raises Tabitha to life. God's healing, the apostle learns, has no bounds. That's the second story of Joppa.

And then comes the third story of Joppa. On the heels of Tabitha's rising – there comes for Peter a vision. And the vision is a vision that tells him that the love of God, the grace of God, the healing of God – is meant not just simply for Jewish men and women — but that the love and grace and healing of God is meant for all people. Not just Jews, but Gentiles alike. And so unlike the story of Jonah, Peter takes the

bold step and departs from Joppa not to run from the call of God to love those once far from him – but to pursue the call of God to love those once far from him. Such is the third story of Joppa.

Three stories buried under the rubble of twenty centuries.

And yet, though there is no trace any building or street of the old Joppa – what are we doing? We are still telling those stories today, aren't we? Joppa may have changed its name, building may have been built upon building, civilization may have progressed on top of civilization – but somehow these stories ... these stories of God's boundless love and healing remain.

The healing of a world. The healing of a city. The healing of a woman. We still tell these stories today. Civilizations come and civilizations go, but we still tell the tales of grace, the stories of reconciliation.

Is it to suggest that if there is anything eternal – it is found where God's healing love occurs?

Let me tell you a story... It happened on the day of my graduation from college. Now if there is a day the events of which you would likely remember fully and in detail it should be the day of your graduation. The culmination of four hard years of school. The achievement of a great milestone. I am guessing though that few of us can remember much about our graduations. You probably can't even remember who spoke at your graduation. I sure can't. But there is one moment on my graduation day I will never forget. A couple of days before graduation a few of us soon to be graduates had decided to drive down to Pittsburgh to see the Pirates play. And we had invited to go with us a fellow by the name of Chuck Donley — who was the custodian for the dormitory where we lived. Chuck had become a good friend to all of us. Sort of like a dad away from home. Chuck himself was a grandfather and we told him to invite along his seven year old grandson to join us for this baseball game. We arranged a time that we would pick up he and his grandson to head down for the game. Well, as these things sometimes go — plans kind of fell through at the last minute — fewer and fewer people could go – so at the end we bagged the baseball trip. Well, it was my responsibility to tell Chuck. But I didn't. Forgot. And there Chuck sat at home with his eagerly awaiting grandson — and nobody came. Nobody showed up. The grandson was crushed.

The next day, the day before graduation, I ran into Chuck on the campus — and he laid into me. Ripped me up one side and down the other. Quite justifiably. He questioned whether I had learned anything decent while in my four years of school. I have never felt so small. And after Chuck let loose his last invective toward me ... we turned and walked away from each other. I realized that was the last time I was going to see him. I was graduating the next day and that would be it. So the next day came and we graduated and we hugged our friends and we made our way to our rooms and we packed our last things and we got ready to leave. And like all commencements all that is lost to the sands of time. Except for me. For as I'm packing my last few things — who knocks on the door — but Chuck? In his hands a graduation gift. In his eyes ... big tears. "I couldn't live with myself if those were the last words you had heard from me. I will miss you like a son. And I have already forgotten that it happened."

That campus will someday cease. Buried under time. Buildings turned to dust. But the story, at least for me, will remain.

So to think about the mission and purpose of the church – might we be good to consider that whatever we do – whatever way we occupy our time and our talent and our treasure – whatever energy we may give over to meetings and programs and activities and committees and budgets – whatever conversation and debate we might have about what is right and what is wrong – whatever temptation we might have to judge this person or that person, or this nation or that nation , or this culture or that culture - - might we be good to remember that there may be little of what we do with any of that that will be remembered – other than stories of God's healing love, other than when we pursued the call of God to bring healing love into the lives of those he has called us to. There will come the day when Church of the Palms with all its beautiful buildings will fall prey to the march of time. Strata upon strata. Stained glass window and marble tables buried under rubble. Only the stories will remain. When the hungry one came and we gave him food. When the thirsty one came and we gave her drink. When the stranger walked in and we welcomed him. When the naked one appeared and we clothed him. When we heard of the sick one and we ministered to her. When we learned of the prisoner and we visited him. These will be the stories that will stand the test of time.

In the wake of the bombings in Boston many people took notice of the instinctive response of those near the finish line who after being shook by the percussive blast of the explosion – turned and ran. But they ran not away from the blast, they ran to the blast. They ran to the people who had been struck by the

blast. In light of this, almost immediately after the Boston bombings there was shared on social media pages a quote of Fred Rogers, the Presbyterian minister and host of the famous children's program, who once said:

“When I was a little boy and something bad happened in the news, my mother would tell me to, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people helping.’ she’d say. And I’ve found that that’s true. In fact, it’s one of the best things about our wonderful world.”

It’s not just the best thing about our world. It’s the only thing that will remain.