

“Mass Of Victims”

9-14-07

Exaltation of the Cross

In 1991 Hollywood made a movie entitled “*Regarding Henry*.” Harrison Ford starred in the leading role of Henry Turner. His character was a successful lawyer with a ruthless reputation for achieving fame and fortune. The actress Annette Bening played the role of his attractive wife, Sarah, and Mikki Allen played his daughter, Rachel. They live in a plush Manhattan apartment. Henry Turner has everything he wants, but is still an arrogant and unfeeling human being.

Early into the story line, Henry leaves his apartment late one evening and goes to a corner store to buy some cigarettes. He walks in on a robbery in progress and is shot twice, in the clavicle and in the forehead. When he regains consciousness, he cannot remember anything, nor can he move due to temporary paralysis. He transfers from the hospital to a rehab center and makes friends with his physical therapist, Bradley. He undergoes sessions to help him regain his memory and rediscover who he is. It ends up being a bewildering experience for him. The shooting incident has turned him into a child. After several months he reluctantly returns home.

At that point in the movie the plot changes, the script changes and his life changes. Before the shooting his life of professional success and greed hid a great deal of inner chaos. He has been unfaithful to his wife, aloof with his daughter and ethically dishonest in his law practice. As his memory gradually returns he and his wife fall in love anew. He develops a closer and warmer relationship with his daughter when she teaches him to tie his shoes. As his therapy progresses he regains his entire memory, especially an incident about a man he cheated out of a just reward in court just before the shooting. He learns all over again what it truly means to be a human being as he develops new desires to care about others. The newly converted Henry cannot return to his law practice because to be successful again he would have to betray the man he has become as a victim. He quits his job, takes his daughter out of a posh boarding school and with his wife Sarah they become a family at last.

This movie is about an uncaring professional man involved in a crisis not of his own making but where he becomes an innocent victim. The moral of the movie is patently clear. The challenge for any victim is to consciously choose how to remake their life.

For some people there are books to read on “*How to remake your life*”. For others there are plenty of workshops to attend for learning new skills to remake your life. For TV addicts there is Dr. Phil, Oprah Winfrey and other celebrity shows who interview people who have refashioned their lives after some experience of being victimized.

For us there are the Judeo-Christian scriptures. The Old Testament is an ongoing story of a loving God intervening in the history of a chosen people victimized by slavery. The New Testament continues that story line in the only son of God, Jesus, being a victim to

free all people from their slavery to sin. Let's ponder these stories in order to uncover the good news that the son of God, Jesus, who as a victim became our hope.

The scripture lessons for this Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross speak about people who desire to remake their lives. In the reading from the Book of Numbers the Chosen People had become small worshipping a lesser God than Yahweh, the mighty one who rescued them from slavery, journeyed with them through the exodus and gave them the Promised Land.

In the movie, Henry Turner, the victim, is awakened to the need to remake his life by being shot during a robbery. In the Book of Numbers the Chosen People are awakened to the need to remake their lives by God sending snakes to bite them. The biting was more than painful or deadly. It was a wake-up call to be contrite. And with a change of heart the snakes that afflicted them became the sign for their healing. It was not the snake that changed, but the unfaithful Israelites. By looking at the bronze serpent with a contrite heart they stood tall again as the People of the Living God and reclaimed a happiness lost by their bitter complaining.

St. Paul teaches a similar lesson to the Philippians. In healing the world's hurt and forgiving sinners, Jesus demonstrated that God was not on the side of suffering and evil but was eager to remove it from our lives. That happened when Jesus accepted the call to become a victim for all humanity. The cross became the instrument of our hope, the proof that God will go to any length to turn sorrow into joy, and hopelessness into hope.

That is Jesus' challenge to Nicodemus in the gospel reading from St. John. Here is a religious leader and influential member of the Sanhedrin whose curiosity with Jesus stirs him to want to know more about his identity and mission. Nicodemus should be aligned with the religious establishment who had contempt for Jesus and resistance to his message. Instead he is a risk taker. Jesus lets him know, that as a faithful Jew he reverences the religious traditions of Moses lifting up the serpent in the desert. Then he adds a new tradition, Jesus will be lifted up to reverse death with eternal life. Jesus' mission is not to condemn the world, but to save it from lesser gods, who turn us into lesser people by robbing us of hope and a destiny beyond this life. In the New Testament it is not a snake who saves us, but the only Son of a loving God. A cross replaces a pole and an obedient son replaces the converted hearts of a sorrowful people. Jesus is now the way for sinners to remake their lives.

The true stories of real victims are not scripted like Hollywood movies. Harrison Ford played a victim in the movie "Regarding Henry," but that is not the same as being a victim.

The survivors of the terrorist attacks of 9-11-01 can tell us the difference. The victims of the clergy sex abuse scandal can tell us the difference. The victims who survived the Christmas day Tsunami of 2004 can tell us the difference. The victims who survived Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 can tell us the difference. The victims who survived the shooting at the Amish school at Nickel Mines, PA in 2006 can tell us the difference.

The victims who survived the massacre at Virginia Tech this past April can tell us the difference. Autistic and mentally challenged children ridiculed in public can tell us the difference. Innocent people caught in the crossfire of sectarian violence in Iraq can tell us the difference. The victims of rape, domestic violence, cancer, identity theft, corporate greed and the slander of reputation can tell us the difference.

Every time a new victim is added to the list the shadow of the cross looms darker and wider. When hearts are broken or shattered hope becomes a little more smothered and hidden. But for victims who choose to remake their lives hope can be restored through the suffering and cross of Jesus Christ. He is the only true antidote for any victim who chooses to move from being a victim to being a wounded healer of other victims.

Through his cross and suffering Jesus transcended his role as victim and fulfilled his destiny to be a wounded healer. I believe he did that not just because he was the Son of God, but because he surrendered to a higher power, leaned on a presence greater than himself, and gave his heart to a loving father who loved him back in a way that brought him back to life after death. The spiritual truth hidden in that father-son relationship is that any victim can be loved back to life when they surrender their hurts, scars, and pain to Jesus Christ and his father, the divine care giver who showed Jesus the victim how to become Jesus the savior. Whenever that happens then a cross as a sign of suffering gives way to the cross becoming a sign of hope and healing.

There have been times in my life when the crosses I have carried have been unwelcomed. Like many of you, I have stories to tell about feeling abandoned by God, stories of being victimized by fear, or anger and hurt as in the case of the clergy sex abuse scandal. These unconverted emotions have slipped into my life like a spy and nestled there like gangrene.

Like the chosen people in the reading from the Book of Numbers, I have become a lesser person by complaining and grumbling more times than I care to admit. Oh how I wish they were diseases of the Old Testament only. Like Nicodemus in the gospel reading, I have developed a contemplative attitude toward life enough that new stirrings of wonder and hope have led me to Jesus in prayer, in desperation, in new desires to get free of old demons.

Throughout my faith journey I have come to believe that when things are going poorly in my life, when the voices of hurt or failure smother life out of me, I am pushed to an inner crossroads where I am forced to ask, where will I place my faith? Will it be in grumbling and complaining which keeps me down and small? Or will it be in the cross of Christ which invites me to look up and look out of myself for a freedom from victim hood that only Jesus can help me accomplish.

The feast of the Exaltation of the Cross forces us to ask, on which side of the cross will we stand? The side that is clean, undisturbed, and antiseptic. Or the side that is bloody, painful, messy and sad to behold because a dead and not-yet-resurrected Christ kills our grumbling with love and melts our smallness with a quiet dignity.

Many years ago as a little boy I went to Stations of the Cross during Lent at St. Joseph's in Clayton, Delaware with my family. I didn't know what they meant, but I knew there was something sacred about them, something that connected me with God. When I was ready to know more my Aunt Mary said to me, "These are about God with you here and you with God hereafter." That was one of those treasured lines you store in your heart like saving an email in order to access later so that it can make a difference when needed.

Exalting in the cross of Christ makes a difference. For victims the difference is in replacing the ego-focused question, "God, why is this happening to me" with the redemptive question, "God, see what is happening to me. Can you help me get free?" For others the difference is in taking back our hearts when we give it to revenge, hate, and retribution and instead give our heart to victims. This is how the cross turns us to God, not to be judged or forgiven, rewarded or punished, but simply to be strengthened and comforted.

In closing I want to share a few lines from the novel, "*The Secret Life of Bees*." I am quoting from page 140: "*Did you know there are thirty-two names for love in the Eskimo languages?*" *Augusta Boatwright said. "And we just have this one. We are so limited, you have to use the same word for loving Rosaleen as you do for a Coke with peanuts. Isn't that a shame we don't have more ways to say it."*

Today, as we gather to honor victims with this "Mass of Victims" it is my hope and prayer that it will inspire us to find new words to translate cross as love, and victims as lovers and healers of Jesus Christ, who loved us enough to become a victim in order to be the hope for all victims to walk with him again on the path that leads away from old wounds to new hope.

Amen.