



“Adrift In A Leaky Boat”

A sermon delivered by

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READING

In the poem, *Staying Alive*, David Wagoner presents some advice on how to survive in the woods. They are practical tips for those who are lost and confused Yet there is a deeper meaning.

It is also a parable on trust, patience, courage, wisdom, and self-confidence in making difficult decisions. It is one of my favorite poems - a scripture on personal survival.

"Staying alive in the woods is a matter of calming down
At first and deciding whether to wait for rescue,
Trusting to others,
Or simply to start walking and walking in one direction
Till you come out - or something happens to stop you.
By far the safer choice
Is to settle down where you are, and try to make a living
Off the land, camping near water, away from shadows.
Eat no white berries;
Spit out all bitterness.
If you have no matches, a stick and a fire-bow
Will keep you warmer,
Or the crystal of your watch, filled with water,
Held up to the sun will do the same.
If you hurt yourself, no one will comfort you
Or take your temperature,
So stumbling, wading, and climbing are as dangerous as flying.
Follow no streams:
They run under the ground or fall into wilder country.
Remember the stars and moss
When your mind runs into circles
And if you find a pathway,
Wheel rut or fence wire,
Retrace it left or right - someone knew where he was going
Once upon a time.
There may even come, on some uncanny evening,
A time when you're warm and dry, well fed, not thirsty,
Uninjured, without fear,
When nothing, either good or bad, is happening.
This is called staying alive. It's temporary.
What occurs after is doubtful.

You should have a mirror
With a tiny hole in the back for reflecting
Whatever disaster you can think of,
To show the way you suffer.
These body signals have universal meaning:
If you are lying flat on your back
With arms outstretched behind you,
You say you require emergency treatment;
If you are standing erect and holding arms horizontal,
You mean you are not ready;
If you hold them over your head,
You want to be picked up.
Afterward, if you see no ropes, no ladders,
No maps, or messages falling, no searchlights on trails blazing,
Then, chances are, you should be prepared to burrow
Deep for a deep winter."

* * * * *

SERMON

"The simple-minded use of the notions right or wrong," wrote Whitehead , " is one of the chief obstacles to the progress of understanding."

It is not a great test of our moral decision making when we are asked to choose between the Good Guys and the Bad Guys. The essence of tragedy is the conflict of one good or right with another.

How do we choose between lesser evils and greater goods?

How do we choose between one neighbor and another neighbor?

How do we choose between a love of self and a love of others?

Inevitably, in these situations there is a price to pay. Any choice we make disregards and sacrifices values we cherish. The dilemma is the competition of moral claims. Not everything can survive.

In order to demonstrate the difficulty, I am going to present a story I have written. It would really make no difference whether I was talking about war, abortion, divorce, suicide, euthanasia, or any other moral dilemma, since the basic approaches are found in each of the problems. It will require your active mental participation in the process of moral decision making. The conclusions may be varied.

A luxury liner, sailing from Boston to England, struck an iceberg in the North Atlantic Sea. As it began to sink into the cold waters, confusion reigned among the passengers and crew.

One long-boat was successfully lowered. Into the old and leaky vessel, jumped the First Mate, eight seamen, and thirty-two passengers, about a third more than the legal capacity.

The sailors rowed and the passengers bailed, but the overloaded long-boat was drifting into a heavy storm. The wind freshened, the sea grew wild, and the waves pounded against the bow.

The First Mate ordered the crew to throw a third of the passengers overboard. Two married men and a little boy were spared, but fourteen male passengers were cast into the sea. They died quickly in the icy waters.

When the storm ceased, a lack of provisions caused further hardship. It was three days before the twenty-seven survivors were rescued and taken to England. Five months later, the First Mate was on trial for manslaughter.

On the stand, he described the terrible tragedy, the acute moral dilemma, and the motivation for his action. He testified:

"The storm was horrible. The boat was sinking. As the officer in command, I had to lighten the weight in the craft. It is the law of the sea that passengers must be saved in preference to seamen, except for those who are indispensable for operating the boat. In my judgment, all eight seamen were needed to keep the boat afloat. It was therefore necessary to choose from among the passengers. And having decided to save the women and children, I ordered the crew to cast out the fourteen single men. Yes, it was a tragedy, but I had to make a decision."

The spectators were moved by his statement. They nodded in agreement. He appeared to be honest and decent.

But the prosecutor demanded justice for the fourteen deaths. In a passionate plea to the jury, he said:

"The question at issue is the question of choice, decision, and judgment. It was the judgment of the First Mate that the boat was going to capsize. It was the judgment of the First Mate that the crew was indispensable. It was the judgment of the First Mate that they would not be rescued. It was the judgment of the First Mate that fourteen men should die. It was the judgment of the First Mate that the storm would continue. No one can play God! No one can kill with impunity. Those who still breathe can not be balanced off against those who will never breathe again. The verdict must be guilty!"

Again, the spectators seemed to be nodding in agreement, as the jury began their deliberation.

First, the Foreman produced a legal precedent which contained the following charge:

"If in your opinion there were no alternatives, and if no seamen could possibly be dispensed with, then the victims should be chosen from among the passengers by casting lots, provided there is time enough to do so."

The Foreman then argued for a quick verdict.

He explained:

"The law is clear. The selection process was personal and arbitrary. The only acceptable procedure is the casting of lots. Since some must be sacrificed or all will die, let destiny choose between them. Let fate decide! The First Mate would bear no responsibility. We must support the law, and he broke the law. He is guilty."

It was a tempting argument: simple, legal, brief. Yet not everyone was convinced. A young woman objected immediately:

"What good is the law? It only raised the very questions we are here to answer. Who knows if there were other alternatives? Who knows if the seamen were necessary? Who knows if there was time for the casting of lots? The law is not dealing with the particular situation. It is our function to weigh the facts and evidence, not to simply quote a general law."

She thought to herself: "A fanatic is one who does what God would do, if God had as much information as he has." She was looking at the Foreman.

Another juror also expressed some doubt. He said:

"Besides, maybe the First Mate was obeying a higher law. In weighing the personal and future consequences of who should be saved, he chose the women and children. Perhaps that was a more loving, more ethical, and more considerate decision than the casting of lots. The moral order does not always coincide with the legal order."

The Foreman spoke again in favor of the legal precedent, not wanting to discuss the higher laws of morality, but he was interrupted by one of the twelve.

It was a provocative comment:

"Do we really want fate to be the final arbiter? Then why are we talking about the casting of lots? That is a human decision, a tinkering with fate. No, in order for chance and randomness to truly determine the outcome, the First Mate should have done nothing at all, allowing nature to decide. Are we actually in favor of fate?"

It was a question that hung in the air, until a fervent voice broke the silence.

It rang with evangelical authority:

"He should have done nothing! It was an apocalyptic crisis! It was in the hands of God! In a strait of that extremity, everyone was a member of the same family. For truly and literally, they were in the boat together; and thus none could be saved separately from the others. God alone decides! They must share their common fate. No one can save himself by killing another, for at such a price he has no moral claim to anything. Thou shalt not kill!"

Not prepared for a sermon, the Foreman waited for another response.

A juror spoke slowly:

"But the First Mate sacrificed a few to rescue still more, a decision we accept in times of war or other extremities. So the apocalyptic demand, a passive resignation to fate, is hardly a responsible position. Nor is the literal biblical commandment. What is sometimes good may at other times be evil, and what's sometimes wrong may at other times be right depending on the situation."

Clearly, this was an unusual jury. Aristotle would be proud. Thomas Aquinas would be smiling. Bertrand Russell would hoot with delight. Legalists, Moralists, Literalists, Situationists - were all represented.

After a break for lunch, a brief comment caused a flurry of discussion:

"We have forgotten the deed itself," said an anguished juror. "It was a violent act of destruction. He willfully killed people. The end never justifies the means."

On the contrary," a juror replied, "if the end does not justify the means, what does? The answer is nothing! Unless there is an end or purpose in mind, any action is pointless, meaningless. Only the end justifies the means - there is nothing else."

"But not every old means is suitable to every old end," another remarked. "They are relative to each other, but the means employed ought to be faithful and appropriate to the end. They ought to be fitting. If they are, they are justified."

And that was the decision of the 'First Mate," a man sputtered. "He wanted to save as many lives as possible. The means he used were drastic, but the end was accomplished. It is like a surgeon mutilating a body to remove a cancer. It is an awful, loving action."

"I think he was too cool and calculating," observed another. "What do you mean by a loving act? He gave an order for a mass murder and you compare it to a medical operation? You are twisting words! What has happened to our moral standards? We need prayer n our schools!"

Love must make estimates," he replied. "If it is careful, thoughtful, and responsible, it must be calculating. We do not prefer one neighbor to another, but we do prefer the neighbor whose need is greater, and we prefer to serve more neighbors rather than fewer. Thank heavens he was cool."

"But he saved himself," she screamed. "He survived, while others perished. How can that be an ethical action?"

"Because, sometimes, the self is to be served rather than any neighbor," he answered, "if many neighbors are served through serving the self. It is a matter of motivation and result."

Of course, the Foreman was thoroughly disgruntled.

In a last-ditch effort to return to the legal issue, he pleaded with the jury:

"Look, we cannot acquit this fellow. There is a law. It is not our duty to make exceptions. What would happen if everyone threw people off their boats when they thought it was a crisis? Chaos and anarchy! The law is our only protection."

But another juror responded, "Exceptions are the growth of law. Every case is unique, the conditions dissimilar, the circumstances different. It is precisely the genius of enlightened justice that we judge according to the situation."

So the jury struggled on for another day, with two major positions predominating in terms of the defendant's choice.

First, there were those who argued that the First Mate should have chosen to maintain order, relied on hope and faith, but ultimately allowed the boat to sink. Thus, he would have obeyed the command "Thou shalt not kill," even to prevent more

deaths. He would have accepted the world as it exists, adding nothing new to its unhappiness, and consenting to suffer personally from the evil it contains.

As a pacifist, he would be saying that the justification for one brutality might well become the justification for all. In refusing to kill, he would be demonstrating that violence can never be used as an excuse for violence since the end is not superior to the means. So the boat will sink, a tragedy will occur, but it will not be a precedent for wanton destruction. Nature, not humans, is the guilty party.

Second, there were those who argued that the First Mate could not escape a choice between evils. In a crisis situation, he could not dawdle, could not trust fate, could not abrogate the responsibility to decide. A surgeon cannot fluctuate over the saving of the mother or the child. A soldier cannot hesitate when the lives of comrades are threatened. They must act - they must choose. For not to decide is to decide.

The First Mate, then, could not be a silent witness to a holocaust. Crushed between terror and the arbitrary, all that remained was the power to save those who could still be saved. In a world where everyone is condemned, where legal principles no longer apply, he had to enter into the heat of battle, into the gray zone of personal morality, and choose a lesser evil. Humans, not nature, are the responsible agents.

The jury debated the issues for another day. Finally, they reached a decision. They entered the court room, where the Foreman read the verdict to the judge. The spectators nodded in agreement.

Yet only the First Mate knew the actual verdict. No jury could determine guilt or innocence, right or wrong, good or bad. Ultimately, it was a question of inner motivation, of the subtle stirrings in the heart when the order was given. Was it an act of love?

"The truth is never pure, and rarely simple," wrote Oscar Wilde. When the dilemma is the conflict and competition of moral claims, the truth is even more complex. There is no absolute answer, and there may be several alternatives.

A knowledge of precedents is helpful, since it provides a record of those in similar circumstances.

An analysis of the actual situation is helpful, since each dilemma is a unique mixture of conditions.

An emphasis on persons is helpful, since the welfare of human beings is the aim of ethics and morality.

An appreciation of reason is helpful, since the weighing and balancing of ends and means is required.

A posture of humility is helpful, since no one is perfect and the long-term effects are unpredictable.

Yet never forget the most important ingredient.

Love is the only universal! Only one thing is a moral imperative; namely, love: nothing else at all. It is not something we have or are, it is something we do. Our task

in every situation is to assure that more loving-kindness will occur than in any possible alternative. Our duty is to seek the goal of the maximum of love, and to expand its province on the widest scale imaginable. Everything else is irrelevant, incompetent, and immaterial. The strategy of love is supreme!

When the First Mate heard the verdict, he was not surprised. He recalled a prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr, which he had used in the crisis on the long-boat:

"O God, grant us the serenity of mind to accept that
which cannot be changed, the courage to change that
which can be changed, and the wisdom to tell the
one from the other. Amen . "

It was not apparent to the spectators, from the facial expression, whether he had failed or succeeded.