

Sermon for January 22

The Point of No Return - Burning Bridges

Clip

Introduction/Theme: Conventional wisdom warns us not to “burn bridges.” We shouldn’t act in ways that cut ourselves off from options, from a way of retreat. This is probably good advice if one wishes to survive in a conventional world. The trouble with conventional wisdom is that it tends to leave things, well, conventional. When you look at the news just for today would you say our lives or communities are conventional? Yet, when you burn a bridge there is this **point of no return** a point beyond which if one speaks their mind or challenges the status quo they may cross that line on their current course of action making a turn backwards physically impossible, prohibitively expensive or dangerous. For others the point of no return is used when the distance or effort required to get back to the old way would be greater than the remainder of the journey or tasks ahead. The point of no returns...have you been there, do you know that looks like? Sometimes conventional tends to keep things the same – don’t they? There are times we all long for a bit of change, a little transformation in the daily tasks of living. I want to think about burning bridges in a positive way today.

There is a song written by Helen Lemmel that has been echoing about in my heart this week:

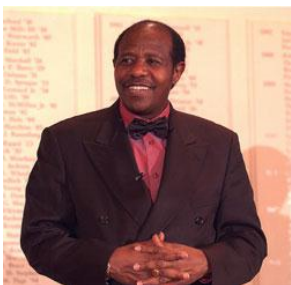
Turn your eyes upon Jesus,

Look full into his wonderful face,

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim

In the light of his glory and grace!

Image/Imitation: Last September in a sermon I mentioned my nephew Nate who joined the Peace Corps, where he is teaching English in the African country once ravaged by ethnic genocide. Last week I read the interview of his hometown newspaper the Windham Independent. The reporter asked him about his 27-month tour of service in Rwanda. Nate said “I’ve always been interested in going to Africa. I was first inspired to work in Rwanda when I saw the 2004 film *Hotel Rwanda*, which depicts a hotel manager’s efforts to save lives during the slaughter that claimed some 800,000 Tutsi Rwandans.”



The Movie *Hotel Rwanda* that Nate referred to chronicles this massacre from the perspective of one man, Paul (Pronounced Rosaysabageena) Rosesabagina, the manager of a five-star hotel right in the middle of the blood shed. Paul was Hutu, the tribe who had taken control of the government. Paul’s job and his identity as a Hutu gave him access to important people, some of the most powerful Hutus in the country.

Paul's wife was a Tutsi, the people formerly favored by colonial rulers and hated by Hutu. Paul was a man who had built bridges over, around, and right through the middle of the hatred that was consuming his country. In 1994 when the killing began, the whole world watched and did nothing! United Nations peace keepers on the ground in Rwanda were prevented from intervening and eventually left with the white tourists and foreigners. Paul and his people were left alone by the conventional wisdom that said intervention in other nation's problems—at least this nation's problem was not wise. Over the course of several days, Paul used the bridges he built with the Hutus to protect his family and staff in the hotel. Soon more people came seeking protection; then still more. The hotel became a safe place for Tutsis trying to escape the murder all around them. As Paul evaded one threat after another, the bridges he built got shakier and shakier.

Finally a chance came to get a number of the families out to a refugee camp and on to another country. Paul's family had their affairs in order, paperwork in hand, and a place on the truck. With his family already on the truck, Paul turned his eyes upon all the Tutsi people left behind—knowing that nothing stood between them and the Hutu Machetes. So Paul let go of his wife's hand and the truck and set his bridges on fire. Paul opted for something new—even if it meant losing everything. Even though Paul was reunited with his family eventually and did escape later, in that moment all the bridges were burned and life would never be the same. Paul Rosesabagina saved more than 1200 people, and said of his deeds later that it was simply the human thing to do what all of us should do! This is the story that motivated a young man to enter the Peace Corps. Oskar Shindler did exactly the same thing saving 1200 Jews from the death and died penniless. He burned bridges for others to live; moving beyond the point of no return.

Indwelling: In the Bible story for today – Jesus comes proclaiming the Good News of God, saying the time is fulfilled and kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe in the good news. Repent turn around, burn your former bridge and walk with me...Jesus meets four fishermen on the shores of the Sea of Galilee – ordinary folk like each one of us. They fished because their fathers fished. James and John are the sons of Zebedee working alongside their father. It is conventional wisdom to stay in the family business, so they did. Fishing was a hard life but a stable conventional life. That is until Jesus spoke to them and they turned their eyes upon him...

"Follow me and I will make you fish for people" and they do. Mark uses his familiar word *immediately* to describe their response; they did something unconventional – they left the nets behind. In the case of James and John they left their father behind with nets in hand. This was their call to follow and there seems no hesitation. They leave behind the fishing boat, family, friends, and their faith in conventional wisdom. They burned a bridge and became disciples who changed the world.

This last week at the Men's Prayer Breakfast we talked about Beuchner's famous quote – "your call is when your deepest gladness meets the world's deepest need." Jesus noticed the gifts of the men fishing and asked them if they would like to fish for people. He took their deepest passion and gave them the opportunity to meet the world's deepest needs. The outcome was joy – not always easy; but life giving. Jesus so loved the world that Jesus went beyond the "point of no return"; later in Lent we hear how Jesus set his eyes upon Jerusalem, there he was crucified on a cross and in so doing built a new bridge of life with God! It was done out of love...

Immediacy: In the play *The Phantom of the Opera* one of the highlights is the song: ***Past the Point of No Return.***

Past the point

of no return -

no backward glances:

our games of make believe

are at an end . . .

BOTH

Past the point

of no return

the final threshold -

the bridge

is crossed, so stand

and watch it burn . . .

We've passed the point

of no return . . .

It is a love song of course that addresses the moment of transition in the relationship. It is that moment that when you cross over and moving forward it changes your life forever.

In the end: What is it that will move you beyond the point of no return? In a few minutes we have talked about suffering in Rwanda, the Holocaust and those who were willing to move beyond a point of no return. In all of these places it was far from what we would label conventional. We wonder why the world is the way it is, don't we? Why the hatred? We often forget the cost of discipleship – these moments we crossed over a point of no return. For Nate it was the example of Paul Rosesabagina and a love of serving others in Africa. For Paul it was the love of his wife and her Tutsi Family who were being killed. For Oskar it was the love for his Jewish sisters and brothers and making a difference in the lives of many. For me, I am not as brave as Nate or courageous as Paul Rosesabagina but I am able to love and connect people to the love of God here in this part of the world. Maybe the gift of hope is something that I offer another. For my friend Pat, it is his love of shattering the stigma of religion. For Mark it is his love of young people and building bridges with youth and family ministry. For George it is his love of the Khati's and helping them build new lives in Madison. For us maybe the point of no return is everything outside of: Seeking, Seeding, Serving and Sending in God's love. Within this love of God we are willing to burn bridges that create healthy living for others. It is not easy following Jesus – because we leave behind what we know. We have nothing to fear, however – because Jesus is the leader. When we follow Jesus we burn bridges because we need not come back this way again.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,

Look full into his wonderful face,

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim

In the light of his glory and grace!

We can follow unconventional wisdom to meet an unconventional world that needs to change. Thanks be to God! Amen.