

Veterans Day is just behind us, and our town's Interfaith Thanksgiving Service is just around the corner. In honor of those two occasions I have a story to tell you. It's not a new story, but it's one that I have never heard before a parishioner told it to me a few weeks ago.

The story takes place in 1943 at the height of WW II. A transport ship left New York harbor (one of many) bound initially for Greenland. It was called the S. S. Dorchester. It was a converted cruise liner that had been built to carry 350 passengers in luxury, but was modified to carry 904 passengers, mostly military men. They were packed in like sardines. But they were in good spirits. The men aboard were from all over the Eastern half of the country; from farms and cities, from mountains and coastlines. They were from all sorts of different backgrounds, and faiths.

On the ship, also were four military chaplains who were travelling with the troops, all lieutenants. The men were **George Fox**, a Methodist preacher. **Alexander Goode**, a Jewish chaplain, **Clark Poling** was ordained in the Protestant Reformed Church, and **John Washington**, a Catholic priest. They had all trained together at Chaplains School at Harvard, and had become good friends; serving their God and their country.

When the enlisted men on board ship saw these four chaplains and their friendship with each other they were a bit surprised. Most had grown up knowing that people of different religions didn't get along, each one believing that their own faith was the correct one. But here were these four men talking with each other as people with a real bond. Their differences in belief did not keep them apart. They even invited all the men to all the shipboard services that were held. These preachers were very different.

At the same time, however, there was a sense of foreboding on the ship. These men were not on a holiday cruise. They were headed to a war zone. Also, they knew that there were German submarines patrolling the North Atlantic in what was called wolf packs. The troop ship was protected by other smaller war ships that sailed with it, but that didn't guarantee safety. The captain ordered that all the men sleep in their clothes and with their life vests on at all times.

Unfortunately, On February 3rd of 1943 the worst happened. The ship was torpedoed by a German submarine just off the coast of Newfoundland. The ship's electrical system was knocked out, and they were sinking. The captain and officers could not communicate orders to the men, and everyone was in panic.

The chaplains did what they could to calm the men, and they helped organize the evacuation. In the most frightening of situations these men brought a measure of comfort to as many men as they could; reminding them of God's presence, and God's saving grace. **"Surely it is God who saves us, we will trust in him and not be afraid."** How hard must that be to say, and to believe, if you are on a sinking ship in February in the North Atlantic.

Many men were helped into lifeboats, but not all the life boats would come free. Some were frozen solidly in place by frozen sea spray. There were not enough boats, and there were not enough life jackets. The chaplains removed their own lifejackets and gave them to others. They then linked arms, said prayers and sang hymns. The ship sank in 18 minutes and the four chaplains, along with many enlisted men, went down with the ship.

The witness of these men of different faiths shared the same conviction that there is no greater love than to lay down your life for a friend. There were survivors. And one survivor wrote a moving testimony: “The last thing I saw, the Four Chaplains were up there praying for the safety of the men. They had done everything they could. I did not see them again. They themselves did not have a chance without life jackets.”

All four were posthumously awarded the Purple Heart and the Distinguished Service Cross. In 1988 February 3 was established by Congress as an annual “Four Chaplains Day. A postage stamp was created in their honor. There is a stained-glass window in the National Cathedral in Washington dedicated to them, and there are many military chapels that have monuments and windows with their likenesses, and in their honor. These brave men died, **and** their testimony to their faith is remembered.

Our readings today are both frightening and comforting, terrifying and inspiring. Isaiah tells the people that better times are ahead, and that God’s will is to create a new city, a new reality for people who live their faith.

Jesus tells his followers that although there are frightening signs around them, and looming destruction, that this is what gives them an opportunity to testify. They will be called upon to make a defense of themselves and their faith. When push comes to shove, did they really trust God? Jesus tells us that when we are to testify to the truth, the love and mercy of God, we will be given the words to speak. Those four chaplains testified to their common faith in words, and even more so, in action.

What about you and me. When things look bad do we still believe the words of God in Isaiah? Do we have the faith to trust that our Lord is in the midst of our lives? God cannot keep us from dying, but can keep us from fear and despair when things are looking dire. I myself do a better job of being faithful on some days more than others.

Hearing this story of heroism this morning reminds me that in every age there are men and women who rise above the petty differences that we use to keep us apart. If we spend our lives trying to identify with others, find commonalities rather than differences, we can be and do so much together. You and I may be called upon some day to give up our life jacket to save another person’s life.

Sources: YouTube: *The Four Chaplains – Sacrifice at sea. “there is no greater Love”, the Catholic Transcript Online written by Dr. Donald DeMarco.*