

# **“Diving into the River of Life” by Peter Bankson**

**April 21, 2013**

## **The Fourth Sunday of Easter**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since Monday I've been struggling to understand what difference the Boston bombing makes in my life. More fear and hatred don't get me very far. More prejudice isn't what I want. Although I lived for four years within a mile of the site of the attack it seems far away from where I am now and how I feel called to spend the rest of my life. For most of the week, the news cycle felt more like something to avoid than something to learn from. And, frankly, until Friday I had successfully avoided adding this latest violent tragedy to my thinking about what I would share with you this morning.

Then, late Friday night, I ran into one of those thickets where the ideas and the stories in my head grew so dense that I ground to a halt. And in the quiet that rose up as my busy brain tripped over itself that still, small voice suggested, “Start from the bombing.” So I did.

For me, last Monday's Boston Massacre helps me see three points that have been in this week's lessons all the time, even when I was too busy to see them:

1. The Boston bombing is a violent tragedy rooted in fatal misunderstanding. We need to risk a loving response.
2. Deeper understanding can lead us to loving responses.
3. Responding this way to God's call will cost us our lives, but that's life!

## THE BOSTON BOMBING IS A VIOLENT TRAGEDY ROOTED IN FATAL MISUNDERSTANDING

Let me start with the bombing in Boston. Although the investigation continues into the motives behind the attack, it seems pretty clear to me that my understanding of life and community is very different from those who did it. I expect that we will soon learn more about why these bombings took place. But if what we know from other recent incidents of mass violence is any guide, deep down we will find a layer of anger, fear and hatred. What can we do about that? Beyond the pursuit of justice, what can be done to overcome this deep misunderstanding? Is there ANY loving response to those who built the bombs that caused the carnage?

There were lots of loving responses in Boston on Monday. The first responders put their lives on the line for those they didn't even know. Marathon runners ran on to the hospital to donate blood to help the victims. There was a vast outpouring of condolence and support from across the country. But I wonder how much this will change the hearts and minds of the perpetrators ... or even the wounded victims and the families of those who were struck down.

As I thought about the idea of a loving response in the face of tragedy, the story from our reading from Acts floated to the surface. In many ways the story of Peter reviving Tabitha is very different from the violence in Boston last week. But as I thought about it, I was led me in an interesting direction. Reviving Tabitha, the beloved member of a small group in Joppa, was clearly NOT what Peter had in mind that day. But when the disciples from Joppa arrived in Lydda and asked Peter to come quickly to Joppa, he went.

I wonder if he knew why they were inviting him with such urgency? I can imagine that as they hurried to Lydda, the two men who came bearing the invitation talked about how to phrase it. "Should we tell him that Tabitha has died and we want him to raise her from the dead? Or should we just ask him to come

and let him find out what's going on when he arrives?" Conversations like that seem pretty common to me.

However they phrased the invitation, Peter arrived to find the beloved Tabitha dead, her body ritually prepared for burial. Peter took in the situation and responded to the unexpected emergency. He asked for time alone with the body. He prayed. He invited Tabitha to get up ... and she did!

He did what any first responder is trained to do – to apply your gifts and skills to the limit of your ability in an unexpected and chaotic situation, setting aside your self-concern for the common good. And, with a little help from Peter, Tabitha got up. It was a loving thing to do.

The scripture tells us that Peter stayed there in Joppa for some time after that miraculous revival. I'm sure part of his time was spent in helping Tabitha's friends and her faith community come to a fuller understanding of just what had happened on that fateful afternoon. And from the story in Acts, this deeper understanding of Peter's loving action helped change many hearts and minds.

Misunderstandings can be a real barrier to community, but there are loving things we can do to help find more common, deeper understanding.

#### DEEPER UNDERSTANDING CAN LEAD US TO LOVING RESPONSES

It may not be easy, but we can learn how to have those difficult conversations that lead to new, shared stories of hope. Often, deep listening is the most loving thing we can do.

Here at Seekers Church there are at least three new initiatives that offer good examples of how to nurture this kind of learning.

We have invited New Story Leadership to make their home here. Under the sponsorship of our Eyes to See Ears to Hear Peace

Prayer Mission group, Paul Costello and a group of interns from American University are here among us. This summer they will be welcoming another group of young adults from Israel and Palestine as they work around Washington DC and with each other to discover a “new story,” one that carries the hope for a peaceful future in their homelands. They are using the small office upstairs next to the meditation room, sharing our space as a place where they can work together. You are likely to meet them from time to time, and when you do I encourage you to invite their stories of the healing work they are doing together. They are learning to do the loving thing in the face of fatal misunderstandings that have terrified their people for thousands of years and led to untold acts of violence.

Another initiative is the work on deepening conversations for racial reconciliation, and mass incarceration. Many of us are involved in several related efforts. Along with folks from our sister faith communities in Church of the Saviour, Trish and Sandra both recently completed a training in Philadelphia that should help extend and deepen the conversations on race and diversity that have engaged us with Covenant Christian Community Church for the past several years. And last week they attended a conference on mass incarceration that seems to reinforce the New Jim Crow conversations and a fresh series of city-wide revival meetings marking on the 45th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. for many, these conversations provide safe places to search for a “new story” that can bring hope to people on all sides of these cultural divides and deepen our understanding.

And finally, in the current term of our School of Christian Living, Keith’s class on “Difficult Conversations” is helping a dozen of us learn how to grow beyond smug self-assurance toward an ability to deepen relationships with people who challenge our understanding and our identity.

As part of that class, I am learning just how hard it is for me to ask personal questions. Just this week I realized that

this reluctance began at a very early age. I was the only child born to couples in my parents' cohort of friends before all the men went off to World War II. That meant that until I was six years old I had almost no "peer" friendships. As a boy of four or five years, all my relationships were with adults. I was known as "the little man around the house." Because of all the stress of the war, the absence of my father for four years and living with my mother's parents (where the relationships were pretty tense) I learned early-on that it wasn't right for me to express my feelings, or to ask the adults what they thought or how they felt.

Even today it feels intrusive, even improper for me to try to understand how someone else really feels, or to express any strong (negative) emotion that I am feeling myself. In our age of "authentic communication" this can easily create the impression that I'm an aloof know-it-all. In fact, while I am embarrassed by the label, part of my identity has always been that I could know it all, if I just tried hard enough without asking any of those forbidden questions! Those patterns were so strong that as an undergraduate in college I spent six of the eight terms on academic probation! You see, it just wasn't right to ask my professors what they meant, let alone why they believed as they did, or how they felt about it. I was supposed to get all I needed from reading the textbooks and listening to the lectures. And that's not the way I learn. But that was MY problem, and those inner voices were quick to remind me that I should just try harder!

So the class on "Difficult Conversations" is offering me some really important ways to build relationships, to realize that there is always more than one way to understand what is going on and to ask the kinds of questions that help build a "third story," some variant of your story or my story that has room for both of us. I think that's a small, personal example of what the New Story Leadership project, and the racial reconciliation conversations are all about. And finally, at my

advanced age, I've seen a door open to new understanding. There's a milestone here, marking a path to the loving thing. And by the grace of God – and with your help – I'm daring to contemplate deeper relationships that can build deeper understanding.

When I was on our Servant Leadership Team with Sonya, she used to remind me – often – that different people build relationships in different ways. Some do it, she said, by sitting face-to-face over a cup of tea and sharing their stories. Others do it, she would say – looking straight at me – working together shoulder-to-shoulder. I found that comforting – a bit too comforting I realize now, because it gave me an easy out to avoid those difficult conversations that are so necessary to build relationships. Thanks to Keith. I'm beginning to see what I missed in Sonya's message: sometimes it's easier to get to the difficult conversations when you're working together, but working together is no substitute for the conversations that build relationships. It won't be easy, but as we work on it together we'll find some exciting ways to do the loving thing.

**GOD'S CALL WILL COST US OUR LIVES, BUT THAT'S LIFE!**

As I've reflected on the bravery that rose up this past week in response to the Boston Massacre, I've been reminded of many, many examples of what it might mean to "lay down your life for your friends." The first responders who stemmed the flow of blood ... the runners who ran on to the hospital to donate blood ... those among us who open their homes and their purses to help those in need ... the Care Pack Team ... the Apostle Peter who went to Joppa because folks there needed help ... Kate Cudlipp's decision to let go so Carole could live ... Bokamoso ... PAVA and the pilgrimage to Guatemala ... our conversations on race and diversity... teaching Sunday School here ... and so much more. We all lay down our lives one day at a time. The question is, "For what?"

The river of life may be full of rocks and rapids, a lot like

the wild image of Red Creek on our bulletin cover.

The good news is that we are not alone in this turbulent river of life. We have each other, and God is with us. The psalm for this week is Psalm 23. You know, "The Lord is my shepherd... green pastures ... still waters... restores my soul..." I've always seen those images of still waters and green pastures and the table set before me as a promise of safety and comfort. As I read it this week, with the brutal misery of Boston on my mind and thinking about the turbulence of life all around me, I got a different image.

I think the 23rd Psalm can be a rallying cry for those who have jumped into the River of Life and are swimming hard to stay afloat as they are washed downstream faster than they can swim. That's pretty scary, but I've done enough whitewater kayaking to know that there are places of calm water in even the most turbulent streams. The 23rd Psalm might just be a signpost for a quiet eddy where you can stop long enough to catch your breath and eat a power bar to get ready for the next set of rapids.

As I think about risking a loving response to violence, as I risk asking those turbulent questions that can lead to deeper understanding, Psalm 23 promises that God is there, helping us see where we can find what we need to keep our heads above water.

## CONCLUSION

So, for me, the violence in Boston last Monday helps me see these three points that have been in this week's lessons all the time, even when I was too busy to see them:

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2. Deeper understanding can lead us to loving response.
3. God's call will cost us our lives, but that's life!

More than a the promise of an easy walk to some green pasture

at the end of the day, Psalm 23 can be a rallying cry for those who are on the Way. Let's dive into the river of life!