

The Road Less Traveled – January 19, 2018

I watched a movie the other day that I had never heard of. It was the 2016 film *USS Indianapolis: Men of Courage*. It tells the true story of the crew of a heavy naval cruiser that delivered the components of the atomic bomb to Guam in the closing weeks of World War II. It was a secret mission, so the ship was dispatched without its usual escorts that protected it from Japanese submarines. After delivering its cargo, the ship was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine and sank in the Philippine Sea. 300 sailors went down with the ship, while another 900 were cast adrift, some in rafts, but many with only life jackets or clinging to debris.

They remained in the water for four days before finally being spotted by a U.S. Navy patrol plane. In those four days all but 317 sailors died, either from exposure, dehydration, salt water poisoning or as a result of injuries sustained in the attack. Dozens of the survivors were killed by sharks.

It was a story from the war with which I was not familiar. The movie was not great, by any means, but one scene touched me deeply. The “rest of the story,” as Paul Harvey might say, is that the *Indianapolis*’ commander, Capt. Charles B. McVay III, was eventually court martialed for failing to take the proper evasive action that might have prevented the attack. During his general court martial, prosecutors took the bold step of calling as a witness Commander Mochitsura Hashimoto, the commander of the Japanese submarine that fired on the *Indianapolis*.

Hashimoto testified that no evasive maneuver would have prevented the attack given how close his submarine was to the *Indianapolis*. Nonetheless, McVay was convicted of “hazarding the ship,” though the sentence was remitted by Fleet Adm. Chester Nimitz. In 2000, 32 years after his death, Congress passed a resolution that McVay be exonerated for the loss of the *Indianapolis*, and President Bill Clinton signed the order.

It’s an incredible story. But the scene that really got me was the face-to-face meeting between McVay and Hashimoto immediately following the court martial. The two men, sworn enemies on the stage of battle, face each other as men. McVay, who was played in the movie by Nicholas Cage, asks his former adversary if there is anything he could have done to save his ship. The Japanese commander assures him there was not. And then he tells McVay that as an officer in the Imperial Japanese Navy, it was his duty to kill him. But as a man – a man incidentally who listened to the screams of dying men on his submarine’s passive sonar – he lived with regrets. McVay then admits that, though he was never told explicitly the contents of his cargo, he had a pretty good idea of what it was and the absolute death and destruction it would bring. And while as a Naval Captain he had done his duty, he found no honor in the role he played in the deaths of thousands of Japanese citizens. The scene ends with Hashimoto expressing hope that, as they had forgiven each other as former adversaries, in time they could forgive themselves as men.

Now I have no idea if the encounter between the two commanders actually happened or if it was artistic license on the part of the writer, but the scene got me thinking about the truth of which the two men spoke. You don't have to be engaged in a life-or-death battle to find yourself struggling with the tension between duty and righteousness. It seems like doing the right thing and fulfilling our roles as spouses, parents, students and employees should be one in the same, but the truth is that often it isn't. Often times, especially at work, we are called upon to make decisions that fly in the face of what the basic tenets of our faith tell us is right. Even as a pastor working in a church, I find myself struggling with that tension at times. Who we are able to help? Who we *should* help? Who needs a helping hand, and who needs a firm word of truth spoken in love? No doubt you experience that same tension.

Sadly, there are no easy answers to that tension. In our working lives, we are given responsibilities, roles to play, and often times those roles require us to make decisions for the good of the organization, even though they may not be good for the individual. Do we stand on faith, stand on principle, or do we do our jobs? It's a decision that we each have to make on a case-by-case basis. And it's a complicated decision with many layers. So please do not think that I am saying that it should be easy. But what should happen is that debate within yourself. Will you always decide on the side where Jesus likely would be? Probably not. But what is critical, however, is that you know the difference between the right decision and what is right. Because it is within that tension, that space between the two, that faith become real.

See you Sunday.