

Judges 16:28-31 & Luke 23:32-38

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"Samson and Jesus"
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Text: *"And Jesus said, 'Father forgive them....'"*

At the zoo one day I saw a Milwaukee County Sheriff's vehicle - which in reality is a golf cart - and it bore the bumper sticker **Attitude is Everything**. Speaking of bumper stickers with attitude I saw one which expressed a rather poor disposition while traveling in Brookfield a few weeks ago near the Congregational Home. It stated rather brusquely: **You're Really Ugly - And Your Mother Dresses you Funny Too!** This does not seem to be the kind of attitude the Milwaukee County Sheriff's Department is looking for on the road among the many different personalities they meet each day.

My wife tells me of an elderly, frail, 90 lb. woman she met at St. Luke's Hospital this summer. What she lacked in size she made up for in attitude. One day this woman was attacked by two 120 lb. Malamutes who were bent on doing her great harm. Our determined 90 lb. hero went into action with a frenzy and beat the two dogs off of her and in the process she broke the jaw of one dog and sent both of them scurrying away. She suffered minor cuts and scrapes and a broken wrist. She was in the hospital not for her injuries, but to help take care of her older mother who is suffering from Alzheimers disease and taking on that battle, I am told, just as fiercely as she defeated those large dogs.

Attitude is everything in our daily living and our dying. Attitude helps determine the real winners in life by displaying the way we act in the face of adversity. It doesn't really matter who won or lost a game, but how well we played it. The poem "How Did You Die?" by Edmund Vance Cooke is appropriate:

*"Did you tackle that trouble that came your way?
 With a resolute heart and cheerful?
 Or hide your face from the light of day
 With a craven soul and fearful?
 Oh, a trouble's a ton, or a trouble's an ounce,
 Or a trouble is what you make it.
 And it isn't the fact that you're hurt that counts,
 But only how did you take it?"*

*You are beaten to earth? Well, well, what's that?
 Come up with a smiling face.
 It's nothing against you to fall down flat,
 But to lie there - that's disgrace.
 The harder you're thrown, why the higher you bounce;*

*Be proud of your blackened eye!
It isn't the fact that you're licked that counts;
It's how did you fight—and why?*

*And though you be done to death, what then?
If you battled the best you could;
If you played your part in the world of men,
Why, the Critic will call it good.
Death comes with a crawl, or comes with a pounce,
And whether he's slow or spry,
It isn't the fact that you're dead that counts,
But only, how did you die?"*

Throughout our lives we die many times. Our deaths are in the form of change and our attitude toward change guides us from one transformation to another either in the fashion of a winner or one destined to go down in defeat. In her article entitled "Somebody has to Die" Ellen Anthony made these reflections. *"Change for me means somebody has to die. Me. A way I am has to die. Mostly I resist."* Ms. Anthony's comments encapsulate the human dilemma in a nutshell. It is hard for us to accept even the gentlest changes while still grasping for control of our existence. We tend to believe when and if we ever become masters of our daily living we will never have to endure the discomfort of change again unless we call the shots. The more we hang on to this thinking the harder it is for us to accept the dying of our old selves and the renewing powers of change. As frightening as it may sound, letting go of everything and drifting in the comfortable spiritual confines of God's will prepares us for the most severe changes which may jolt our lives including the preparation of our own deaths.

The early Christians were well aware of this. Pastoral psychologist and church historian Morton T. Kelsey comments on the early Christian martyrs and their pagan onlookers. *"The pagans who witnessed them were amazed and stunned by the casual way in which Christians met death, not just stoically but with joyous abandon."* To underscore this, I would add that the early Christians faced death as an opportunity to change for the better. Death was not considered a demon at the doorstep, but an opportunity for healing spiritually and becoming whole in God. Even in our lives the death of an outmoded idea or principle we've so long held on to or our propensity to always be right or hold a grudge can bring about change and healing. Our attitude about change is what will or will not allow us to participate in it. Modern day spiritualist Sister Elaine M. Prevallet wonders about our ability to accept changes and healing and wonders if we are willing to die to our old selves that we might become like new. She writes, *"The morning has that washed look, after the rain. The air is crisp and clear. Crickets and crows - a curious combination - are celebrating noisily. The leaves are beginning to look a little limp; maybe they're loosening their hold. Or maybe it's the tree that loosens its hold on*

the leaf. Would that I could participate as gracefully in the cycle of life and death. Stay in tune with the loosening, be ready to move into the next phase."

We do not have to explore very deeply the contrast read in today's scripture lessons. It all centers around attitude. Samson lived like he died using physical strength and might to reap bitter vengeance upon his accusers. Jesus died like he lived with compassion in his heart for those who betrayed him and put him to death. *"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."* Compare the two stories and how they've lived on. To me the story of Samson is just that. Another story from the pages of the Bible which has a beginning and an end. The end of Jesus' story is just the beginning for the lives of his apostles, the wayward Paul, the martyrs of the early church, the saints of the middle ages, the Pilgrims in the New World, and you and me. Samson's story to all but Rambo fans leaves us all a little empty and maybe wondering so what. Jesus' story provides the hope for healing as we grow through many different changes in our lives including physical death at which point our spiritual wellness may be complete.

Our attitude determines whether or not we will be willing to take opportunities presented before us or reject them out of foolish pride or self will. I was reading the other night, with great interest, about the battle of Chancellorsville during our country's Civil War in May of 1863. The great interest stems from the fact that the Twenty-sixth Wisconsin Volunteer Regiment, made up of mostly Germans from Milwaukee and Wauwatosa, had their first fight there and in that regiment was my great-great grandfather, Herman Sentz. The long and the short of it is that Herman Sentz, the Twenty-sixth Regiment, and the entire right wing of the Union Army were surprised by one of the most classic military flanking moves in all of history produced by Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee. After pouring over detailed information about this engagement for over a year now, I discovered to my amazement that the men in the lower ranks knew what was going to happen to them for many hours and tried to convince the corps and army commanders to change their positioning and prepare for a fight. The attitude from the high command was, *"What do a bunch of dumb Germans know anyway?"* Unfortunately, even after many warnings and plenty of opportunity, disaster struck the Union cause and opened the way for a Confederate victory in that battle.

On the lighter side I am reminded of our Sr. High Camp last week at which a positive attitude opened or closed many doors of opportunity for campers. People who were late to meals relieved those normally assigned to clean up afterward. People who tipped over sail boats raked the beach free of rocks. People who were nice to counselors and especially reverends got extra privileges and free tickets to heaven. At least that's how I remembered it.

Attitude is everything. At least it is key in our ability to change, that is, to die of the old self and put on new spiritual clothing provided by God. And if we are forced to change and do not welcome the change, our attitude can still help us to prevail over greater odds, if that is what we choose. When serving my church in Iowa I had several members who had to place their aging parents in area nursing homes. So, guilt ridden and fearful of nursing homes themselves, an oft heard comment went like this. *"Sure, I have nursing home insurance. It's in the drawer of my nightstand at home; in the form of a loaded revolver."* If you haven't guessed, that is an example of a poor attitude.

On the flip side, I have witnessed many remarkable people face the anxiety of terminal illness and prepare themselves for death as calmly and serenely as the Christian martyrs described earlier. I watched a man named Lloyd fight painful cancer for many months. I knew he was in pain, but he never cursed the disease or his lot in life. He would miss his family and worried for his wife Arlene. When the day came for him to die I watched him take his last breath with a smile on his face and the look in his eyes seemed to go beyond where we were in the room. His attitude carried him gracefully and peacefully toward the end. His attitude ministered to us who have not yet gone his way. His attitude took him to the opportunity of change and the gateway of healing.

Robert Louis Stevenson's "Requiem" speaks to the person ready to live and die at their best:

*"Under the wide and starry sky
Dig the grave and let me lie:
Glad did I live and gladly die,
And I laid me down with a will.*

*This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
And the hunter home from the hill."*

If a bitter person can sap our energy and crush us much like Samson did to his enemies, then a loving person can give to us, even in their moment of death, just as Jesus did through his trial and ordeal. Which path will we choose? Yes, we have the power of choice. Attitude is everything. Amen.