



Message on Bluffton College Bus Tragedy

President Swartzendruber's message at Bay Shore Mennonite Church in Sarasota

March 4, 2007

Life is difficult. That's the opening line in a book *The Road Less Traveled* by Dr. M. Scott Peck. I've heard of people who read that first line and were so angry they put the book down. It was much easier to live with the illusion that life should be free of pain.

Life is difficult. Our friends at Bluffton University would tell us this morning, it is no illusion. It may feel like a bad dream, a nightmare from which one hopes to wake, but it is true. Counselor Glen Denlinger of the Charis Center here in Sarasota offered a similar perspective at the prayer vigil Friday evening, "This is our reality."

Not only does the Bluffton community understand those realities in a new way, so do the hundreds of residents in Alabama and Georgia, who lost loved ones and possessions because of tornadoes this week. No doubt some of us here this morning are trying to cope with challenges we didn't expect.

Unfortunately, there are communities all around the world for whom "life is difficult" is a daily reality. Every day is more about access to basic needs, or more about just trying to survive, than it is about being satisfied and comfortable.

Life is difficult and this is our reality. So what? Now what? One individual who threw Peck's book aside because of his anger over the opening line, came back years later, after more life experience, to read the entire book.

Well... some five years later, and being forced to face life's difficulties, feeling disillusioned, coming to terms with life's harsh realities... I picked up the book again. This time around it made a whole lot of sense. I could 'hear' what the author was saying... because I was open to listening, I was no longer delusional.

If you and I accept the reality that life is difficult, if we refuse to be delusional, we are left with some very challenging questions. To use the words of one of those magazines in the check out line of the grocery store, "Inquiring minds want to know." Of course, we want to know. We have an insatiable desire to know. We are curious. God created us, not as robots, but as human, fully human, created in God's image.

How could it be that a large group of students are doing what students do in the middle of the week—go to school in Enterprise, Alabama—perhaps preparing for a calculus test AND thinking getting the courage to talk to someone they hope to invite to the prom—how could it be that some of them never return home?

How could it be that a bus load of young, vibrant, healthy, university students—who care for each other, who spend hours together practicing and playing baseball—who have looked forward to their annual Spring Break trip for months—how could it be that they are sleeping peacefully, perhaps dreaming of that bottom of the last inning home run they will hit to beat EMU or the no-hitter they will toss—how could it be that in a few brief seconds sleep turns to flight, and quiet turns to chaos?

Perhaps even more confounding—why are some left relatively unscathed and others likely never had a clear sense of what was happening? Some see the paramedics and others are transported across the divide between this world and the next. Why one and not the other?

Chance? The luck of the draw? One just happened to sit near the front of the bus and his friend (or brother) decides to take a rear seat. Or are there other, more cosmic factors at play?

Some will surely say, "It was his time. God chose who to receive and who to leave." Not only is this hardly comforting to friends and family, I think it's another expression of delusion. For a brief moment it's comforting because it provides a quick answer that momentarily satisfies our need for answers—and most of us want answers that are simple. And, in the midst of unimaginable grief one can be forgiven for not thinking very clearly.

Life is difficult and it is so because we are human. Thank God that is so. Otherwise our robotic selves would never experience joy because we would not know pain. We would not know love because we would lack the capacity to experience separation. Robots possess no freedom of will. It's easy to be a robot, as long as someone keeps the electric plugged in and the joints well oiled—or the computer chip accurately programmed.

I think God didn't somehow decide that Enterprise Alabama should be singled out or the baseball team at Bluffton needed a nasty wake-up call. Go down that path and all of us should live life in daily fear. Remember—whatever theology I hold for another, I must be willing to accept for myself, for my family, our university, our community.

It is possible to embrace a theology that celebrates the presence of God in every moment and experience of life, without believing that God causes such tragedies. For me, and I believe this is more consistent with the message of the Scriptures, you and I are fully human, and we live in a world that is far from perfect. We get sick. We get old—some of us have the good fortune to get older than others. We are victims of others mistakes. Of course, we do things to ourselves that result in pain or that cause pain to those we love most.

Now what? The words of Romans 8, quoted by one of the Bluffton grandfathers (of a player who is fine), Howard Baumgartner, should always be in our repertoire of responses, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The text that I had earlier been given for this morning, a portion of Matthew 7, could easily have been utilized for a time such as we have experienced this week. These are Jesus’ words near the end of what we know as the Sermon on the Mount.

In essence, his message to us is this: actions speak louder than words. Words can be cheap. The fruit of our lives—our actions finally drown out the words we speak, however eloquent or loud they may be.

We know that at a very basic level. Every communication expert reminds us that how we are heard and perceived is only partially determined by the words we speak. Ted and Lee help us to understand that reality every time they perform. We would laugh if we heard only their words, but we laugh much more vigorously because we see their crazy facial expressions, their clothes, the way they walk or stumble!

(For the Atlanta reporters here today, you should know that Ted and Lee aren’t “normal” Mennonites! But, they are graduates of Eastern Mennonite University and we’re proud of them.)

By the way, I’ve often said that a community that cannot laugh together will never know how to cry together. I feel sad for those who cannot enjoy great humor—laughter and tears are closely related and are fully human expressions.

Let me close with a word to the youth and young adults here today. I know it’s very difficult to fully engage in facing death. In fact, I’m not even sure we should expect you to do so. We certainly shouldn’t ask you to contemplate this in the same way as those of us with more life experience.

I do believe we should invite you to live life with all of the energy that God gives to youth. I invite you to channel your amazing energy into those activities that are life-giving and constructive. We know you will make mistakes—older people like me made them, and surprise!, we continue to make them.

I am regularly blessed by watching hundreds of young adults grow into maturity, gaining great experience by serving others. This week EMU has several service groups scattered across the southeastern part of the U.S. One group was headed to Jubilee Georgia, very near to Americus where one of the tornadoes hit just before their arrival. I will be eager to hear their stories next week.

Many of our students regularly volunteer throughout Harrisonburg and Rockingham County. Meeting with adopted grandparents, tutoring elementary students or adults who are learning English as a second language. Leading worship services on our campus every week. Coordinating Bible study groups. I could give you names of students who are involved in each of these activities.

It concerns me greatly when the contributions and activities of these students are overshadowed by the misbehavior of others. Our role as adults is to model the kind of behavior, backed by appropriate words, we hold as high standards for all of us in the church.