

Sixth Weekend After Epiphany (RCL/C)
Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26
February 12-13, 2022
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

79 years ago this month, on February 3, 1943, United States Transport ship Dorchester was torpedoed off the coast of Greenland. It was carrying more than 900 U.S. troops and civilian war contractors, and it sank less than 20 minutes after it was hit. Thankfully it was part of a convoy, since the Allies were fully and painfully aware of the danger of U-boat “wolf packs” stalking and sinking shipping.

If you’ve heard of the Dorchester (a luxury liner before it became a transport) it’s probably because of the four chaplains who gave their lives. Methodist pastor George Fox, Rabbi Alexander Goode, Reformed Church in America pastor Clark Poling, and Catholic priest John Washington had joined forces to help panicked shipmates find their way from below deck to escape hatches and into lifeboats. When lifejackets ran out, they gave away their own. Eye witnesses reported that as the ship went down, they were standing on deck with linked arms, singing hymns. They are memorialized in stained glass in the little funeral chapel at the Brigadier General William C. Doyle Memorial Cemetery in Wrightstown, due west of us on 195.

This last week Lisa Beck shared an article from the National WW II Museum website¹ about another little known hero who helped rescue troops from the Dorchester. His name was Charles Walter David, Jr., and he was a Coast Guardsman. Born in NYC in 1917, David was just shy of 24 years old when he enlisted in the Coast Guard in spring of 1941, 9 months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. He had a wife and a three-year-old son. As an African American serving in an era when the U.S. military was still highly

segregated, he was relegated to KP duty in the kitchen. However, he did his work well and was promoted to mess attendant first class, charged with the new job of keeping officer quarters tidy on U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Comanche, part of the convoy escorting the Dorchester and 2 other transport ships.

After the Dorchester was torpedoed shortly after midnight on Feb. 3rd, '43, the captain of the Comanche ordered the crew to pull the cutter close to retrieve survivors, despite the danger of it being targeted as well. The men who were thrown into the water by the impact or who jumped in for lack of lifeboats died quickly in the freezing waters and 10 foot waves. Others were so weakened by the trauma and the cold they had a hard time pulling themselves up the rope climbing nets thrown down to lifeboats from the rescue ship. So Charles Walter David, Jr., a very low man on the totem pole as mess attendant first class, joined others descending to the lifeboats and helping the survivors climb to safety. Lt. Langford Anderson was XO (executive officer, 2nd in command) on the Comanche, and he fell overboard during the safety operation. David jumped in and saved him. He also saved another fellow crewman from the Comanche who had been helping survivors in the lifeboats and then became too weak to ascend the rope climbing net back to safety.

All in all, 230 of the over 900 people aboard the Dorchester were saved. Charles Walter David survived the night of the rescue, but contracted pneumonia from his exposure to the elements and died on Greenland 54 days later, on March 23. The article on the web has a beautiful photo of David's young wife and 5-year-old son (dressed in a sailor suit) receiving the Navy and Marine Corps Medal, awarded posthumously to him. One of the men presenting the medal was Lt. Anderson, whose life David had saved. In 2010 a US Coast Guard Sentinel Class cutter was named in David's memory.

I'm guessing this man was poor, by our standards. He was African American, enlisted in a segregated military. If he survived the war, he would not have benefited from the GI bill; neither educational nor housing assistance offered to white veterans would have been available to him. In today's Gospel Jesus says, "*Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God*" (Luke 6:20b). I want to be quick to say that Jesus **isn't** praising poverty here. There's nothing good to be said about homelessness, hunger, hopelessness, disease. He **is** saying that in those places and times when God's holy and loving will is done, when God's kingdom breaks in, even for a fleeting cameo appearance, God rejoices and humans are raised to their intended potential: the humans who are no longer homeless, hungry, or hopeless, **and** the humans who allow themselves to be channels through which God replaces poverty with plenty, despair with resurrection hope, brokenness with wholeness.

Mess Attendant First Class Charles Walter David, Jr., Rabbi Alexander Goode, Fr. John Washington, Revs. George Fox and Clark Poling, all were lifesavers on God's behalf in the darkness on an icy sea in the midst of war-torn chaos. The chaplains could have kept their life vests to themselves and David could have simply kept the coffee coming during the rescue operation. They all chose instead to risk their lives for others, not because life is cheap but because life is priceless, and others' lives even moreso than their own.

How does someone act so selflessly? Especially thrown into hellish circumstances in the middle of the night, in the middle of the ocean, when self-preservation would most predictably kick into gear? There are verses from this weekend's lesson from Jeremiah and Psalm 1 that may give us a glimmer of understanding. Jeremiah 17, verses 7-8:

*Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,
whose trust is in the LORD [in every conceivable circumstance].
They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.*

*It shall not fear when heat comes [or torpedoes hit or illness strikes
or unemployment happens],
and its leaves shall stay green [and its courage will last and its faith
will not falter and its love will not fail];
in the year of drought [in the presence of danger, in the midst of
uncertainty,] it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.*

Psalm 1, verses 2 and 3:

*...they meditate on God's teaching day and night.
They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season,
with leaves that do not wither.*

Charles Walter David, Jr., is a largely unsung hero of the Dorchester rescue, and we do not know much about him. I choose to believe, though, and I don't think it's a stretch, that his willingness to **risk** his life for others, like the four chaplains' decision to **give** their lives for others, was rooted in faith that this life is prelude to another, everlasting life, made possible through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. In this weekend's lesson from 1 Corinthians 15 (vv. 17-20) Paul makes his argument by positing the unthinkable:

*If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.
Then those also who have died in Christ have perished [beneath the waves, in
the hulls of sunken ships, on highways, in hospital beds, on countless
battlefields, in drug shooting galleries and in back alleys]. If for this life only
we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.
But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those
who have died.*

Therefore we love and we live for our Lord Jesus Christ who died that we may live. We remember the new commandment He gave the night before He died: "*Love one another as I have loved you.*" (John 15:12) We also recall His words: "*...no greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*" (John 15:13) The 3 Christian chaplains were certainly aware of that command when they obeyed it. Rabbi Goode surely honored the Torah's

command that we love our neighbor as ourselves, and may have remembered as well the wisdom of the Talmud: “To save one life is to save the world entire.”

Most of us aren’t called to literally lay down our lives. But loving one another as our Lord has loved us? Challenging, but by God’s grace, we can head that way. A step in the right direction is acknowledging that many gifts are given **to** us to pass **through** us to others. We are not the “poor” in today’s Gospel. We live indoors, we eat when we’re hungry, we put on a coat or we crank up the heat when we’re cold, we have running water and indoor plumbing, we know how to read, we are part of a community of care, and we have received the gift of faith. We are rich. We are blessed. May we be generous with our blessings and ready to step up for our neighbor however and whenever the need and the opportunity arise. Amen

¹<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/coast-guardsman-charles-walter-david-jr-dorchester>.

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