

“Be my valentine?”

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“Life-Preservers”

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For many, February 2, means Groundhog Day. For few, it’s a day far more significant than a silly fuss and beers over some poor rodent. February 2 commemorates when, on February 2, 1943, the USS *Dorchester*, an army transport ship, was churning through the North Atlantic waters as part of a convoy. A German U-Boat fired its torpedoes. The *Dorchester* was hit below the water line. Captain ordered: “Abandon ship!” Of the 902 men aboard there would be only 230 survivors.

From an official account: *“Aboard the Dorchester, panic and chaos had set in. The blast had killed scores of men, and many more were seriously wounded. Others, stunned by the explosion were groping in the darkness. Those sleeping without clothing rushed topside where they were confronted first by a blast of icy Arctic air and then by the knowledge that death awaited.”*

The lifeboats and rafts were over-crowded. Despite the panic, four men remained calm, four army chaplains: Lt. George L. Fox, Methodist; Lt. Alexander D. Goode, Jewish; Lt. John P. Washington, Roman Catholic; and Lt. Clark V. Poling, Dutch Reformed.

“Quickly and quietly, the four chaplains spread out among the soldiers. There they tried to calm the frightened, tend the wounded and guide the disoriented toward safety. One private found himself floating in oil-smearred water surrounded by dead bodies and debris. “I could hear men crying, pleading, praying,” the soldier recalls, “I could also hear the chaplains preaching courage. Their voices were the only thing that kept me going.”

Most men were still topside. The chaplains opened a storage locker and began distributing life jackets. When there were no more life jackets, the chaplains removed theirs and gave them to four frightened young men. Foolish chaplains – what was in it for them? Character isn’t about being brave, tough, or strong. I doubt the chaplains would have ascribed themselves as such. It’s about dedication, trust, devotion to something more important than yourself.

“As the ship went down, survivors in nearby rafts could see the four chaplains--arms linked and braced against the slanting deck. Their voices could also be heard offering prayers.” The Four Chaplains: Three Christians and a Jew, united in greater love and faith. Holiness amidst atrocity. That’s when holiness best becomes evident, evinced.

I frequently need to be reminded what February 2 commemorates to avoid letting the day’s troubles and anxieties drown me. I frequently need to be reminded to be more righteous (meaning, love that promotes goodness), to remember all are my brothers and sisters, to remember why I wake up in the morning. You too? Who’s clean? When I recall emissaries sent to encourage hearts, I remember who I could be.

Worldly magnets deceive the needle of my moral and spiritual compass away from true north. When I permit this, these magnets of prejudice, prevarication, these perversions of pride, profit, power, and pleasure become my idols. I steer in their unholy, unhealthy, and inhuman direction. Our society, same

as all societies, is rife with attractive idols. We choose to worship idols because we want to get what we want.

My parents persistently loved me, despite when they didn't particularly like me. There are times I feel the same about our society, our nation. Each age faces moral and spiritual assaults. We suffer several crises now. Some solutions must be applied externally: rule of law, civil rights, security, knowledge, facts, science, these life-preservers. The only sure cure comes internally: the longitude and latitude of our hearts, minds, wills, the course of our souls. How about you? Given these exasperating, rude, humorless, lonely, self-interested days -- extremism tearing apart our social contract -- do you need your heart encouraged?

We could also remember the motto of Boy's Town, "He ain't heavy, he's my brother." The Boy's Town statue honors this commitment. This motto, besides inspiring the Hollies' song, echoes a 19th century Scottish Sunday school book on Bible parables that tells of a little girl who struggled to carry her younger brother. Some asked her if it was too much for her. She replied: "No, he isn't heavy, he's my brother." Who will you carry? Who has carried you? To whom would you give your life jacket? Who will say about you: "you encouraged my heart." Be my valentine?

Towards the end of Melville's "Moby Dick," Ahab's peg-leg is splintered. First mate, Starbuck, holds him and helps Ahab onto the deck of the Pequod. In a rare humane and lucid moment, Ahab says: "'Tis sweet to lean sometimes."