

**“Unless You Repent”
The Rev. James S. Ward**

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“Unless you repent,” says Jesus, “You will all perish as they did.”

This is really just the same thing as he says later in the garden at the arrest when Peter takes a sword and cuts off the ear of the slave of the High Priest. Jesus says, “Enough of that! Whoever lives by the sword will die by the sword.”

And this not so much a call to pacifism as it is a simple statement that ultimately the reality that we inhabit determines the meaning of our life and of our death. In other words, identity is not innate or intrinsic. It is not given or somehow internally generated from our soul or from our DNA. The “self” is instead a metaphor, a shorthand representation of a complex set of interactions with and reactions to our environment, of commitments, judgments, and loyalties.

Perhaps an illustration can help us begin to explore this notion of repentance. Last week I received in the mail a classic film and finally found time to watch all two and a half hours of it. It was Akira Kurosawa’s 1951 film *Ikiru* usually translated into English as *To Live*. It was made right after his film *Rashomon* which has come into English as a word that describes the phenomenon of different points of view witnessing the same event that the film portrays and just before *Seven Samurai*, the film that was the model for the American Classic Western *The Magnificent Seven*.

Set in post-war Japan, *Ikiru* is the story of Kanji Watanabe, division chief of Public Works, in a bureaucratic system where pride is taken by his underlings and colleagues in being successful by doing nothing! When a group of desperate mothers comes to the department asking to have the mosquito-infested cesspool on their street cleaned up and turned into a park, they are sent to another division, and then to another, and another. Watanabe himself is given the nickname by a young female clerk “the Mummy,” because all he does day in and day out is sit at his desk piled high with papers and stamp forms “denied.” But Watanabe is introduced to the viewers at the very beginning of the film as a cancerous x-ray of a stomach. When he learns he is dying within the next six months, he goes through a “dark night,” a drunken adventure with a novelist who plays Virgil to his Dante and shows him around the hellish but unfulfilled and unfulfilling desires of the bars, brothels, and dancehalls of the city.

During this passionate night the rakish writer does something very striking to a Western viewer: he calls Watanabe “Christ” and refers to his terminal illness as his crucifixion. The next morning Watanabe runs into the young woman who had nailed him with the nickname “Mummy,” and tries to recapture life through her. They spend the day together and he says that he wants to be with her because she is “so alive.” In that moment his resurrection begins as we overhear in the background of the department store where they are sitting a birthday party going on and the American song “Happy Birthday” being sung so the significance of his rebirth will not be lost on us.

Even though he has been given six months sick leave he decides to return to his desk and begins to take up the cause of the mothersøpark. He fights the bureaucracy and even goes against the vice-mayor and faces down the local Yakuza boss. The next scene is his funeral at which we learn that he has died overnight his frozen body discover in the swing in the park he has finally succeeded in finishing. The mourners (Iøm sure there were eleven of them), all his fellow bureaucrats at the division of public works, begin to speak openly about the change in him, about his courage, persistence and kindness. Slowly they join together in a vow to be like Watanabe and to become true, fearless servants of the people.

Watanabe has repented. The final scene leaves the viewer with a challenge. A request like that of the mothers who wanted the park comes to the department and the new chief who has taken over for Watanabe begins to stamp it refused in the knee-jerk manner of a successful government bureaucrat. But one of the mourners, now a disciple of Watanabe, stands up as if to remind the new chief of the fearless way Watanabe showed them how to overcome death, how to stand against the forces of evil embedded in the government office. But as the film ends he hesitates and the outcome is left unknown. It is as if we are being asked to take up his mission as well wherever death reigns in our lives and in our world.

What changes Watanabe is clear-eyed confrontation with his own death. Like us who are baptized, itø as if he has already died. Tempted first to drown his sorrows, wallowing in his own victimization, and then by a desperate attempt to recover youthful romantic love, he recognizes that only facing his death can free him to be different, can liberate him from the meaningless social conventions of family life and career advancement and enable him to become perhaps Kurasawaø's greatest hero. Not as a samurai warrior but a simple widower who works in an office. His identity the same, but he has changed. He is truly a new man no longer run by the fears and concessions that ran him before.

Those who are described in todayø's Gospel as òsome who were presentö with Jesus, who ask him about the òGalileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices,ö are no doubt taken aback by his response, because Jesus is not occupied with the realm of sin and death which runs them. Itø not that he doesnøt pay attention or isnøt concerned about those who suffer under the yoke of Roman rule. After all, he compares their tragic fate with that of another group of eighteen who were apparently killed by a natural disaster or by an engineering failure. It is, rather, that those who raise the question are enmeshed in the human system that makes death Godø's punishment for sin. God is the God of the living; he has nothing at all to do with death. But, Jesus implies, if you insist on ordering your life around such a system: if you derive your identity, your sense of righteous belonging and self-satisfaction from such a system: if you let fear of death, and fear of Godø's wrath run you; then you can only expect to òperish in the same wayö that you imagine they perished.

This past Friday at 4:30 in the morning Richard Schaper picked me up and we drove to the Canal District to join forty or fifty others from the interfaith religious

community to stand silent vigil as witnesses and observers in the face of Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids on undocumented people living there. Clearly, something needs to be done about illegal and uncontrolled immigration throughout North America and in the European Union for that matter. For too long we have turned away from the immigration situation as if the definition of "success" was to do nothing at all. But separating undocumented migrants from their families with no warning but a knock on the door before dawn is not a solution. And Jesus warns that justifying such behavior because the people affected are criminals, or "illegals," or scofflaws is dangerous. Jesus words, "you all will perish just like them," are echoed in the well known poem attributed to Pastor Martin Neimoller:

They (the Nazis) came first for the Communists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.
Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.
Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Catholics,
and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant.
Then they came for me,
and by that time no one was left to speak up.

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