

April 24, 2016
Obadiah
“No Innocent Bystanders”

At approximately 3:20 on the morning of March 13, 1964, twenty-eight-year-old Kitty Genovese was returning to her home in a nice, middle-class area of Queens, NY, from her job as a bar manager. She parked her red Fiat in a nearby parking lot, turned-off the lights and started the walk to her second floor apartment some 100 feet away. She got as far as a streetlight when a man grabbed her. She screamed. Lights went on in the 10-floor apartment building nearby. She yelled, “Oh, my God, he stabbed me! Please help me!” Windows opened in the apartment building and a man’s voice shouted, “Let that girl alone.” The attacker looked up, shrugged and walked-off down the street. Genovese struggled to get to her feet. Lights went back off in the apartments. The attacker came back and stabbed her again. She again cried out, “I’m dying! I’m dying!” And again the lights came on and windows opened in the nearby apartments. The assailant again left and got into his car and drove away. Genovese staggered to her feet as a city bus drove by. It was now 3:35 a.m. The attacker returned once again. He found her in a doorway at the foot of the stairs and he stabbed her a third time--this time with a fatal consequence. It was 3:50 when the police received the first call. They responded quickly and within two minutes were at the scene. Genovese was already dead. The only person to call, a neighbor of Genovese, revealed that he had phoned only after much thought and after phoning a friend. He said simply, “I didn’t want to get involved.”

The question we all ask is, Why didn't anyone come to her rescue? Why did only one person call the police? Was it simply because no one wanted to get involved? Was it because people wondered what a young woman was doing out that late anyway?

Social science offered one explanation when they came up with the bystander effect. Which says, if you think you are the only one available to help in an emergency, you will likely do it. But if you see others standing around, you will be less likely to act because you think someone else will do something.

However, for us in the church the question we need wrestle with is, "How much responsibility do I have for my neighbor?" It is not a new question. In the Old Testament, after Cain killed Abel, he asked God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The answer, of course, is Yes. In the New Testament, when a lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus told him the story of the Good Samaritan. The conclusion we are to draw is that my neighbor is anyone who is in need. There are no innocent bystanders.

And this is what the prophecy of Obadiah is all about. Today we meet this prophet who we know very little about except for his very short 21-verse prophecy which hammers home the same point. The prophet Obadiah pronounces judgment on the country of Edom for standing by and allowing God's people to be destroyed. The little book of Obadiah has only one chapter, but it takes on a really big topic. Let's begin by getting the story straight.

Back in Genesis 25, twins were born to Isaac and Rebekah. Their names were Jacob and Esau and if you know the story, you know that they struggled against each other from the day of their birth. When they were grown, even though Esau was older, Jacob got the inheritance from

his father Isaac, and the blessing, with the help of his mother's scheming. Needless to say that did not improve relationships between the two brothers. The feelings of hatred and hostility from that event stayed with them for most of their lives, and although they were able to make amends with each other the rivalry continued through the lives of their descendants. The descendants of Esau eventually ended up in a little country called Edom 15 miles wide and 70 miles long.

In fact, there was so much hostility that when the Babylonians army crossed the border to attack Judah, who were the descendants of Jacob, Edom stood by while their relatives in Jerusalem were destroyed. Remember: there are no innocent bystanders.

Look at what Obadiah has to say about Edom:

v. 10. They have acted with violence toward their brother.

V. 11. They stood aside and did nothing. They didn't lift a finger.

v. 12. They gloated and rejoiced over their misfortune.

v. 13. They even looted their goods.

v. 14. They not only offered no help, they even turned people over to the Babylonians.

What kind of brotherly concern is that?

v. 15 says, "As you have done, it shall be done to you." God's punishment will fit the crime.

So, we need to ask what message God might have through this short book for us today. What lesson can we learn from Obadiah? Well, from what we know, the people in Edom did not set out to destroy their neighbors, just as the neighbors of Kitty Genovese did not intend

for her to die. According to the prophet Obadiah, the Edomites began as bystanders. They stood and watched as Babylonian soldiers entered Jerusalem. The Edomites may have been kind of glad to see it happen. Maybe they even said, “They deserved it.” And by the time it was over, the Edomites themselves joined in the looting and even turned the refugees over to those foreign troops. Obadiah declares this wrong and sinful and proclaims that Edom will suffer as well. In fact, when the Babylonian army finished with Judah, they conquered and enslaved the Edomites. The lesson is simple: they should have stood with their neighbor instead of standing by.

For Obadiah a faithful life is one that is seen and felt and experienced by those around us. We are not an island but are connected to one another. And when we think we are better than another, or we have the right to judge another, or the world has to be how we want it to be, we put ourselves in a box and limit our thinking, limit our living, limit our loving. The cure for this is simple and it is the way of life lived by Jesus Christ for us to follow - develop an attitude of humility. Develop an attitude of a servant. Put your focus on God and focus on your neighbors.

Paul Stanley is Vice-President of the Navigators, a worldwide para-church ministry to students and the military. In 1967 he was a company commander in Vietnam; it was there that he took a risk and learned the meaning of Jesus’ words on love:

“On one occasion after the enemy had withdrawn, Stanley came upon several soldiers surrounding a wounded Viet Cong. Shot through the lower leg, he was hostile, frightened, helpless. He threw mud and kicked with his one good leg when anyone came near. When Paul

joined the circle... a soldier asked, "Sir what do we do? He's losing blood fast and needs attention."

Stanley looked down and saw the face of a 16 or 17 year old boy. He unbuckled his pistol and grenades so the boy couldn't grab them. Speaking gently, he moved towards him. The young man stared fearfully, but he allowed the American to slide his arms under him and pick him up.

As Stanley walked toward the helicopter, the wounded soldier began to cry and hold him tight.... During the ride, the young captive sat on the floor, clinging to the American's leg.... He looked out with panic as they gained altitude and flew over the trees. He fixed his eyes back on Stanley, who smiled and put a hand on his shoulder. After landing, Stanley picked him up again and walked toward the medical tent. As they crossed the field, he felt the tenseness leave the young man's body and his grasp loosen. His eyes softened; his head leaned against Stanley's chest... fear and resistance were gone; he had finally surrendered."

You see, Paul Stanley came to realize that there are no innocent bystanders. For we are called this day to surrender to a greater love that Jesus not just called but commanded his followers to show when he said to them and us, "A new commandment I give you: love one another. Just as I have loved you ... [for] this is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other." But is this love rational – not always. Does this love make sense – not always. Is this love radical – always. Is this love hard to do in our world – yes, most definitely. But in this Easter season – this season of resurrection and hope – this is how the

world sees and knows that God is with them – through the body of Christ – through us – through our words and actions – as we show what this radical love looks like.

As we come this day to hear the cry of those who are weak, powerless, suffering, lonely, or persecuted. The silent cries of the woman who wears a little too much makeup to cover bruises that always seem to appear with no explanation, the teenager whose attitude sharply changes and is angry all the time, the co-worker who is obviously stressed out and depressed. Who drops hints of ending their life.

Just recently, I came across the story of Nate Toffel again, as he spoke of his experience where his family was first taunted for being a Jew, then marked as a Jew, then moved to another part of Krakow with other Jews, to finally watching his four sisters, and three brothers, as well as his mother and father, and grandparents killed in a concentration camp, I realized what it means when we don't hear the cry of those who are suffering, who are pushed to the margins of society. Who are dehumanized and stereotyped. Whether it is immigrants, different religious groups, the poor, the unemployed. When people are pushed out they can disappear from sight and our awareness.

For there are no innocent bystanders in life. We are connected to God. Connected to each other. Connected to our faith in Jesus Christ who calls us to step outside ourselves and be his servant of forgiveness and grace and hope in the world.

Once there was a man badly deformed from birth and was angry as he was growing up. He hated himself and others and was bitter toward God.

Then there came a time when one of his neighbors invited him into a small group at their church. This was a group that talked about scripture and what it meant for their lives and so they often were involved in service projects.

Over a period of months this man began to be touched by what he was experiencing. One day it really came over him how much that group of people really loved him. It seemed impossible.

Another day he was struck by their Bible study which revealed again and again that God loves you as you are. "In Jesus Christ, know that God loves you." "Impossible," he thought.

Another day he was touched by the joy of the sharing of skills, gifts, blessings, and effort with others in meaningful, difficult service and mission projects. "I can't be doing this," he thought. "Impossible."

And suddenly, one day, he got up in the morning and looked in the mirror and realized that for the first time in his life he could say to the one looking back at him, "I love you." And he became a new man.

Were it not for the church and the gospel it carries, that never would have happened. It took regular involvement in study, fellowship, and service in the church, which enabled the love of God and the love of God through persons, to enable that man to love himself. And then everything was different.

"I'll bet that the church he was in was not perfect. But the love which called them to invest their lives in this man came was." Because it's a love that always call us from the sidelines. To not be bystanders but to be the body of Christ known by this love, grace, mercy,

hope, and forgiveness. For, it's not just being a good person or doing good things but a radical change in how we speak and act as we each day grow like Christ and seek Christ in the hurting and broken of the world

So, let us come to take an honest look out there, hear the cry's, and see Jesus already at work in our world, calling us to follow him – as his feet – his hands – his heart. Amen.