

Spiritual & Ethical Lessons of the Titanic

Sermon presented by Rev. Martin Woulfe

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Here on this small table I have a modest collection of CDs, books, videos, and magazines. The theme they share in common is the *Titanic*. The most recent addition to my collection is the current issue of the Smithsonian – for as surely as it is April, there is yet another article therein on the *Titanic*.

You may have noticed that often when I preach, I follow a seasonal schedule and often tie my remarks to certain historical events. That is my nature. It is also true to form that there are certain events which have mesmerized ever since a very young age. One of these was the loss of the *Titanic*. 92 years ago. Many other people are equally mesmerized. To many, it was a watershed moment that ushered in the 20th century as the “age of anxiety.” In some ways the repercussions are still felt today.

The bare facts are relatively easy to relate. It was a cold clear night in April – this past week would have been the anniversary – that the royal mail steamer “*R.M.S. Titanic*”, freshly commissioned, freshly painted, on its maiden voyage, struck an iceberg in the mid-Atlantic, and sank. Many lives were lost, including some of the richest and most famous names in Europe and America.

Ninety two years ago, the effect of this news was sensational. Reports of the accident were transmitted far and wide at an electric pace, using the latest technology of the day, the wireless. Dumbfounded operators conveyed those reports with hesitant keystrokes. Incredulous journalists wrote out their stories in a frenzy. The earliest printed accounts wildly contradicted one another. The *Titanic* had struck an iceberg: this they all agreed upon. But there the stories began to diverge.

Some newspapers claimed that the ship was being towed to port. In fact, *The Wall Street Journal* printed the following editorial: “The gravity of the damage to the *Titanic* is apparent, but the important point is that she did not sink. Her watertight bulkheads were really water tight. The forward part of ship must have flooded and it was not surprising to hear that she was down by the head. Nevertheless, she kept afloat after an experience which might appall even the stoutest heart.” Elsewhere in the same editorial, the writer added, “Man is the weakest and most formidable creature on the earth. His physical means of protection and offense are trifling. But his brain has within it the spirit of the divine and he overcomes natural obstacles by thought, which is, incomparably, the greatest force in the universe.” There were reasons why *The Wall Street Journal* printed that editorial which I will relate to later.

Within 48 hours of the initial news, across the globe -- men and women hungry for news began to devour each and every updated report. Then after several days, it began to dawn on them just how far wrong these editors of *The Wall Street Journal* had been. The ship had foundered and more than 1,500 men, women and children had been lost;

far and wide the immediate reaction was one of both astonishment and horror. By the end of that first week, having had several days to absorb the shock and digest the first accounts of survivors, preachers across the globe, walked before their congregations and stood in their pulpits, and they tried to make some sense out of the disaster. I follow in their footsteps.

Let me say that today offers a real challenge for me. As I've indicated, I'm what you might call a *Titanic* buff. I've been fascinated with this topic for what seems like forever in my lifetime. Several years ago, when I heard that a new movie was coming out, I used to scan the upcoming attractions every week. When I first saw a commercial advertising the scene where the jilted fiancé was chasing Leonardo DiCaprio and firing a gun at him, I shrieked at the television set. This was impure. This was tampering with history. Why mess with a story that was profound enough? Why did Hollywood have to ruin it? Yet when the movie did come out that December, I was in line for the first day's matinee. I still have the ticket. So when I start to talk about this particular calamity, I could talk for hours. But I promised myself and I promise you, I will not talk for hours. We can talk after the service. (Laughter.)

In view of the promise, let me say now that there are several spiritual and ethical lessons that I would like to lift up for your consideration. The first is that we are part of an interconnected and inescapable web of nature. Often we speak of the interconnected, but let us also speak of the inescapable. In the poem by Thomas Hardy, *The Convergence of the Twain*, he describes the strange interconnectedness of an iceberg and a ship of steel. He describes the iceberg as, "its sinister mate". For a time, these two items were far and disassociate in his words from one another, but the two converged in both time and distance. They reached a consummation that jarred, in Harding's words, "two hemispheres".

One can speculate about the forces that drew these two objects together. On the one hand you have an iceberg, crafted perhaps tens of thousands of years ago. In 1912, it was recognized that the winter in the Arctic was unusually warm and that much ice had broken off. It was being carried south in the warmer ocean currents. As I think on that, I wonder what events might happen today, especially as we consider the effects of global warming. We know that in its day, 1912, the Industrial Revolution was still relatively new, about 100 years old. The temperatures of the globe had begun to increase. One of the after-effects, little appreciated at the time, was that the Arctic ice began to break up. So the Industrial Revolution which created the *Titanic* also was responsible for the disgorging of the icebergs which spelt its doom.

It is also true that aboard the *Titanic*, a number of, what at the time, seemed trivial, insignificant, unrelated decisions and events – omissions, if you will – were made. Human made. Man made. All of these compounded and contributed heavily to that disaster. No binoculars were issued to the lookouts. A boat drill, scheduled for the afternoon, was cancelled with no explanation. The ship's captain apparently ignored six or seven specific warnings of ice in his path. The *Titanic's* wireless operator had been rude to other wireless operators of a nearby ship, which prompted the latter to turn off

their set and to go to sleep, missing the first SOS that the *Titanic* sent out, by thirty minutes. The officer on the bridge of the *Titanic* attempted to avoid the iceberg rather than ramming it head on, which would have been the standard practice. If he had made the correct choice and rammed it, those in the forward bulkhead would have been killed, but the ship most likely would have survived. By trying to avert disaster, he ensured it.

Suffice it to say that this is just a sampling of a whole series of incidents that contributed to this disaster. If we're going to talk about an interconnected web of existence, it also worth remembering that human beings are relative newcomers to this earth and relatively fragile. As *The Wall Street Journal* of April 1912 did correctly point out, humankind is comparatively physically weak and our physical means of protection are trifling, compared to the natural obstacles that comprise our environment. We know, for example, that most of the victims did not die by drowning, but from exposure.

A second lesson: revelation is not closed. As scientific, as logical, as precise as we may be, as we may strive to be, there is much which is inexplicable. When we lost the *Titanic*, for example, many people began to be troubled by what they called "destiny" and "providence". Some remembered a book published about a decade before. I'll show you the copy. This book was written by a gentleman named Morgan Robertson. The title is *The Wreck of the Titan or Futility*, published in 1898. In this thin book is a description of a huge ocean liner built in England sailing on it's maiden voyage to New York. It crashes into an iceberg in the mid-Atlantic. The gash comes on its starboard side and the sea swallows passengers and ship. And the book begins as follows:

She was the largest craft afloat and the greatest of the works of men. Two brass bands, two orchestras and a theatrical company entertained the passengers during waking hours. From her lofty bridge ran hidden telegraph lines to the bow, stern, engine room, crows nest to the foremast, and to all parts of the ship where work was done, each dial terminating in a marked wire with a moveable indicator, containing in the scope every order and answer required in handling the massive hulk, either at the dock or at sea. From the bridge, engine room and a dozen places on her deck, the ninety-two places of nineteen watertight compartments could be closed in a half a minute by turning the lever. These doors would also close automatically in the water. With nine compartments flooded, the ship would still float. And as no know accident of the sea could possibly fill this many, the steamship Titan was considered practically unsinkable.

Unsinkable, indestructible, she carried as few boats as would satisfy the laws. These, 24 in number, were securely covered and lashed on in their cords in the upper deck, and if launched would hold 500 people. She carried no useless cumbersome life rafts, because, though the law required it, each of the 3,000 berths in the passengers, officers, the crew's quarters contained a cork jacket, while about 20 circular life buoys were strewn along the rails.

Much was made of that book in 1912 and in the years since. People plied Morgan Robertson for answers and basically, he replied that he had had a dream that showed

him this massive ship striking the iceberg. Again, this was 14 years before the ship was built and launched. Coincidence? Perhaps.

Consider this too: according to Walter Lord, who is the author of *A Night to Remember*, when one US senator, William Smith of Michigan heard the news – and Mr. Smith was the congressman from Michigan who chaired the commission to investigate the loss of this ship -- he remembered a piece of newspaper he had clipped years before and stuck into his wallet, something that had struck a chord. In April of 1912, he went through his wallet, found that slip of paper, and it was dated from 1902 and it included a poem about the loss of a ship. The final line of that poem: *...and on its bow: Titanic*. He asked himself and his colleagues, “What does this mean?” Indeed. We could all ask that same question. What did it mean?

The other great lesson which was lifted up at the pulpits and in editorials at the time and still continued to be relevant is: we must not become complacent because of our technological ingenuity. That then was the dominant theme and in many respects continues to be a dominant theme. Where as some saw this as a clear act of Providence, for was this ship not named after the Titans, that ancient fabled race that had challenged of the gods? And had not the Titans been truly punished by the gods for their insolence? And so here was a modern morality play. Had not some people become blasphemous, arrogant and boasted that not even the very hand of God could sink this ship. If they had made those claims, and apparently there were some that came close, here was an answer. Surely, some said, this was a case where Providence saw fit to intervene in history, to strike down human pride and its own ingenuity, much like the ancient Titans had been struck down.

Now with the discovery of the wreck, roughly two decades ago, and with the different investigations, we’ve learned much more about it’s demise. Radio waves have suggested that there was not such a huge gash as was first thought. Some of the initial reports suggested that there was a gash several hundred feet long that had ripped the side of the hull. What radio waves have suggested now is that the actual damage to the ship amounted to twelve square feet of small holes from the iceberg bumping into it and opening up to the sea. How much is twelve square feet? (Demonstrated to the congregation.) So this entire luxury liner was destroyed, was mortally wounded, as a result of damage that when we look at it, seems rather trivial.

Now once upon a time, religious liberals promoted the notion of progress, onward and upwards forever, they said. That exact phrase was on the lips of many UUs at the beginning of the 20th century. We don’t hear that phrase much anymore, for it would seem that one lesson has been made perfectly and painfully clear: we must not expect too much of our ingenuity. In our modern era, several events have reminded me of how easy it is for us to be lulled into complacency. There were the loss of two space shuttles. The first, the *Challenger* exploded. Why? Small ‘o’ rings that had been frozen. From the loss of the rings, the ship and all of her crew were lost. The loss of the *Columbia* several years ago. Because of a small technical error, the entire crew burnt to death. September 11th. Like on the *Titanic*, there were a series of warnings which, after

both events, there were several major commissions – and I'll speak on those. But apparently, the messages were never quite connected, or if they were, they were ignored, resulting in tragic loss of life.

Now then, as now, in the aftermath of the calamity, a commission was appointed to determine the causes of the sinking and the liability. Actually, there were two such commissions. In the United States at the time of the *Titanic*, there was a congressional hearing that attempted to get to the human side of the story. In the United Kingdom, the Board of Trade tried to determine why there were only 16 boats and not 40 or 50. They determined that the people who had built the *Titanic*, who owned it, were protected, because they fell within the boundaries of the law. The Board of Trade was actually populated by either the owners themselves or people who answered to the owners. Since there was a large interest in corporate liability, they did their best to limit the damages.

Earlier, I mentioned an editorial from *The Wall Street Journal*. That editorial was published immediately following the first news of the *Titanic*. And, it's interesting, because, as soon as initial reports were released about this disaster, there were attempts by the insurers of the cargo to sell off their insurance. The rates went wildly back and forth, and some people made a killing – literally – on the loss, dumping this cargo on unsuspecting souls who hoped to make a profit.

You may know that *Titanic* was owned by a corporation that was founded by J.P. Morgan, so technically the *Titanic* was an American ship, not a British ship. J.P. Morgan then, like other corporations today, exerted enormous influence over what the government decides to do in the cases of investigation. You may also that on board the *Titanic* and other sister ships, there was a wireless operator, using the Marconi brand of wireless. At the time, there was a fierce competition between the different corporations. The *Titanic's* operators were actually employees of the Marconi company and not of the *Titanic*. One of the reasons why he was so curt to other ship's operators was because he had been trained to dismiss those calls from ships not using the Marconi brand of equipment. When you add this up with the fact that there was no binoculars, the lack of the boat drill, that there was so many warnings and that they were not heeded, you begin to ask, "Was it truly negligence?" Perhaps. Or you can decide like the US commission that did not want to fix blame on the captain, and say it was not so much negligence but an incredible attitude of cavaliness.

Others were not so impressed with the results of that commission, nor with the wave of sentimentality that arose in the aftermath of the sinking. Joseph Conrad, the novelist, who himself had been a seaman and been in wrecks before, wrote in response (to that flood of sentimentality) the following: "There is nothing more heroic in being drowned very much against your will, off in a hold in a helpless big tank on which you've bought your passage, then quietly dying of colic, caused from the imperfect salmon you bought in a tin from your grocer." One of the great results of the loss of the *Titanic* was that corporations began to be held accountable for the services that they provided and for any losses suffered.

Another lesson: in 1912, the world was a very racist place. When I watch some of the documentaries on the *Titanic* it was revealed that the gates in third class are still locked. At the time of the commission, the officers protested and said that no one had been forced back or held off. But the physical evidence is damning: gates are locked. When you look at the survivors and the percentages, you find that first and second class citizens profited handsomely, by virtue of their money and status. The number of third class passengers that were lost is appalling in contrast.

It is not often known or mentioned that the White Star Line refused to hire people of color. That was a deliberate policy of the White Star Line. If you were black, looking for work, that was too bad. Take your business elsewhere. So, after the disaster, there was a folk song that was sung called *Fare Thee Well, Titanic*, composed and sung by people of color. It highlighted the bitterness that people of color felt because they had been denied fair access to work.

It was also an era of anti-Semitism. Many people were surprised by the heroic sacrifice of one man and one woman in particular: husband and wife, Isadore and Ida Strauss. These were the founders of the Macy's Store in New York. They refused to leave one another and they refused to leave the ship. They were given an opportunity. Mr. Strauss declined and said, "I will not leave before the other men." Mrs. Strauss said, "I will not leave without him." This story was on the front pages and it made them famous. But the public wondered, "Weren't these people Jewish?" because it was so odd to them that people who were Jewish could be heroic.

At the time of the loss, there was much posturing by both the English and American press as to the so-called "heroic" behavior of what they called the Anglo-Saxon race during the crisis. And much abuse was directed towards foreigners, who were described in the papers as "Italians" i.e., people with darker complexions. There was also one real life incident in the aftermath of the actual sinking that offers illumination. One passenger, a young Japanese man, who had lashed himself to a door, was pulled out of the water, one of the very few survivors in the water who was rescued. The officer in charge of the boat who rescued him reported at the time that he was incredible angry to discover that this man, the survivor, lived because he was Japanese and so many "whites" had perished.

One wishes that such racism were a thing of the past. Such as it is, I witnessed things that have made me uncomfortable with how foreigners are viewed, even today, by the American public. If you have seen the movie *Titanic*, the one with DiCaprio, you might recall a short scene, in which there is a family below decks. The family is apparently of Middle Eastern origin. All the passengers by this point are well aware that the ship is in distress and sinking, and the small family is huddled together, fumbling through a phrase book, trying to decipher the signs, trying to escape from the bowels of the ship to the safety of the lifeboats. I saw that film and I was stunned several times in the movie theater, because the audience howled with laughter, watching this poor family

struggle with English, while I was appalled, knowing that for a lack of literacy, they were going to die.

One final spiritual lesson. I submit for your consideration, the same question that I posed to the youth. It's an ethical matter and it really takes the form of a question. While, there is no absolutely right nor wrong answer, this question will touch upon your core values.

Imagine with me that you are standing in the shoes of Captain Edward Smith on the bridge of the *Titanic*. A reality that transcends even your worst nightmare has come to pass. You have consulted with Thomas Andrews, the ship's designer, and you now know that the ship has about two hours to live. You may know, as I mentioned in the synopsis, that both Andrews and Captain Smith were Unitarians. You know that a timely rescue is completely out of the question and at the very best, a thousand lives will be lost, and that you are the person responsible. So, my question to you: whom do you put into the boats? Do you discriminate amongst the young or the old? Will you follow "the unwritten law of the sea," of women and children first? Or, would it be more fair to adhere to a first come, first seated policy? Might you try to accommodate whole families? Would you try to save some of the newlywed couples? I think there were about a dozen on board. If this accident to happen today, in 2004 and not 1912, would you be moved to try to save any and all couples – if so, would that include same sex couples? Or would it only be for heterosexual couples? I ask you to think, but you must think quickly because you must choose for the water is rising and every minute is precious and a thousand lives will be lost.

While you are thinking on this, we're now going to listen to the hymn *Nearer My God to Thee*, which, according to *Titanic* mythology, was played by the band. It probably was not, but it's so closely associated with that sinking, that I think it appropriate to play. Ponder this: in the length of time it takes to hear that hymn, it is approximately the same amount of time that it takes a human being to die of hypothermia, such as occurred on the *Titanic*.