

“Can Anything Good Come Out of...?”

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Many of you who are basketball fans may remember a guy named Ray Allen - one of my favorite guys. Now, if any of you young people are basketball players - because there were both boys and girls up front here who said you like basketball - you go to YouTube. Now Ray Allen isn't that old, but you go to YouTube, and you type in Ray Allen - that is how you learn to shoot a jump shot. That man was silky smooth. It was the same every time and he almost never missed. Ray Allen could shoot from anywhere and it was *swish*.

He went to college at U Conn. Then he played for the Milwaukee Bucks. And then he played for, I think it was, Seattle, and then on to the Boston Celtics, and then he ended up down in Florida with Miami Heat. Great career and great guy. He was also a pretty good actor. He got really great reviews in his starring role in “He Got Game,” which was a Spike Lee movie with Denzel Washington. He was in another one that wasn't so great, so I will emphasize the good movie he was in. I'm not recommending it for young children. It was a pretty racy movie. Boy, he was good in it.

I am bringing up Ray Allen today because it is all Glen Hollister's fault, actually. I don't know if Glen is here today. Anyway, it's Glen's fault and if he isn't [here] I'm even more free to talk about it. [Laughter.]

Glen gave me a magazine he gets from The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. And, in the magazine, it was talking about Ray Allen and his trip to the Holocaust Museum, and then to Poland, and to Auschwitz; and to hear his story in this article, about what it was like for Ray Allen to go there, and have his eyes opened in a new way. Ray said, he went to the house of a Polish gentleman named Tadeusz Skoczlas; and Tadeusz Skoczlas had family who were pre-World War 11, and he lived in the same house as his great-grandfather. In that house there is a great story, and Ray said, “I went into that house and I looked into this tiny place they showed me, and I'm imagining six people down there hiding from death - six real people, crawling through that little hole right in front of me, not that long ago.”

See, Tadeusz' family was Polish (I'm assuming Catholic), but they were courageous enough to hide Jewish people, who the Nazis were looking for in their home. And Ray Allen said, “I was so touched because I knew that these people, that these Polish Catholic people - the Skoczlas family (you know it's so hard to say those Polish names right [laughter]), they were so brave that they didn't see themselves as Catholic or Jewish. They didn't see themselves as one nationality or another nationality, or good or bad, or right or wrong. They saw everyone as human.”

So, they were willing, at great risk to their family - not just mom and dad - but even the children, of being willing to be sacrificed, to do what was right.

Ray Allen said it was so humbling to hear Tadeusz' story, because he said when his relative - who was grandfather - told the story about how it happened one day in February of 1942: The family all except the littlest brother, his grandfather, were in the house, and the Nazis

came to the house that day - and they had a quota. And one of the neighbors said that they had been harboring Jews, so they went over and tore the place up, found that hole in the floor. They pulled up the floor where the hole was and found this little area where Jews could be hiding.

The six Jews that had been there - had been there just hours before - but they had already moved on. But, that didn't matter to the Nazis. They knew that there were 10 people in that house - a mother, father and eight children. There were seven children, so they went across the street to the neighbors and grabbed their youngest child and dragged him over because they were going to kill 10, because there were 10 in that house. They took them out into the backyard, lined them up against the barn, and they died.

Tadeusz said, "My grandfather came home a few hours later and saw them all there."

And Ray Allen said, "It struck me to the core, because would I have done what Tadeusz' family did? Would I have been courageous enough to bring people into my home and hide them? Would I really?"

Many of us could say, "Well, I would have done it, but I have children. I'm willing maybe to sacrifice myself, but not my spouse. Or, my spouse and I would be willing to sacrifice, but we have eight children. We can't. They have the right to live." And would have let the Jews die.

And what Ray Allen said, was he probably wouldn't. And what most of us, if we look at ourselves in the mirror honestly, most of us probably wouldn't have done it either. And, we would have all of the right excuses, but we just wouldn't have done it. Thank God, there were people like the Skoczlas family who were willing to sacrifice for the greater good.

It was a beautiful article. And now, the grandson continues to live in that house, and hopes that his family, from that day forward, will continue to live in that house, so that that memory, that story of his family and the Jewish people who suffered so grievously, that story will never be forgotten.

It reminds me, and why I picked this Scripture when I love Psalm 139 so much, and I picked this Scripture right after Christmas, [laughter] because Kris was going, "I want the Scripture, so I know what to sing."

I didn't think how it would fit with Martin Luther King Day, and then I realized it fit so well, because when you look at this passage, here is Jesus saying, "Philip, follow me." And Philip does.

Then Philip tells the story of Jesus, and he almost makes the mistake of saying, "Let me tell you about this Jesus, the Messiah, the son of the living God. He is from Galilee, just like you, and he is from Nazareth."

And Nathaniel says, "Well, how can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

We do it all of the time. There are certain people who are just not acceptable because of where they come from. Maybe they came from Haiti, or from Africa, or El Salvador. I mean not, everyone can come from Norway. [Laughter.]

But, the Bible doesn't care where we come from. I've said it before. I said it on Christmas Eve. God intentionally put Jesus in Nazareth. so that Nathaniel and everyone else would know that Jesus had to be the son of the Living God. because otherwise nothing good could have come out of Nazareth. It was truly because God is one who cares for all people. even someone as lowly as someone from Nazareth.

The next article in that same magazine that Glen gave me (might have been the second one) was so beautiful. It was called "A Mother's Plea." It was a story about a woman (a film is going to be made under that title, but I haven't seen it yet. I looked for it but couldn't find it, so it must still be coming out.). It was about a woman, a Syrian woman, named Miriam Hallaq. And Miriam has a son named Ayham. Ayham is in a prison in Syria - a political prisoner - like so many other young men. She said he had a year and a half sentence, and he never lived to see the end of it. You see, in Syria since 2011, the Assad regime has been supported both by Russia and Iran. They have waged a war against their own citizens, as you know. They have killed as many as half a million of their own people and they have forced more than five million to flee the country. Some of them are now here in Des Moines, broken, hurt, but resilient all the same.

Miriam said she would go to visit her son while he was still alive in the prison, and she would see all of these mothers going to the prison, often not being able to see their sons, but wanting to find out if their sons were alive or dead. When she found out, like so many other mothers, that they had just killed her son without any kind of trial, without any kind of decision, without posting anything; she couldn't get the body, she couldn't bury her son, and she will never have a grave to go to mourn him.

But, "By *golly*," she said, "I'm going to have a funeral." So, Miriam had a funeral, but almost none of her family showed up. No relatives and very few if any friends, because coming to that service would be sacrificing their own lives in Syria today. It would have been a political statement to have a funeral.

So, Miriam had that funeral by herself, with maybe one or two other people there, and then she had to flee for her life. She is wanted now by the Security Police. But, she said, "I've decided to use every moment left in my life to defend those left in Assad's prisons. And, I ask that every one of you deliver your voices to international platforms, and that you must do so. What happened to Ayham didn't happen to only him, but it happened to every one of you and to all humans on the earth."

I thought about that last statement, and I thought, "What did she mean, '[It] didn't just happen to him, it happened to every one of you and to all humans on earth?'"

Then I went back to Ray Allen, in the article that Ray Allen said, "that some people gave him a hard time for spending time in Poland because he could have been using that time to help his own people." And, Ray Allen said, "I don't have my people or your people, we are all the same people." He was so moved, Ray Allen was, by the Holocaust. We all should be

moved by the Holocaust event and we should never be the same - because we human beings have the capacity to murder millions and use God's name to do it.

So, in that regard we are all touched by evil. And, we have a responsibility to not turn our backs, but to face it head on. And, there are people all over the world who are willing to sacrifice their spouses and their children to do what is right, and we Christians, who should be the example of Jesus Christ in this world, we can't turn our backs either.

So, we have an obligation. We must not think of others as the big "THEM," but as brothers and sisters. As the most powerful country in the world, we are maybe the only ones who can make a difference - not just in Syria; not just in Poland decades ago - but for all of the things that are happening, and everywhere in this world now.

God cared for the lowliest places and the lowliest people; marvelous people no matter where they lived. And God wants to care for the marvelous people of Syria, Africa and everywhere else that has been maligned this week, because just as they cared for people who were Polish (my grandparents had to change their names to Pace, so that they could get a job), you have stories in your background. Most all of you have stories in your history where your ancestors, your relatives had to do something in order to be able to survive. Most of us were treated as "less than." Oh, "nothing good could come out of Poland." "Nothing good could come out of Ireland, they are a bunch of drunks." I have heard that. "Nothing good can come out of Israel." "Nothing good can come out of here or there or wherever *you* came from."

But that is not true, and we know it! So, on this day, *especially* this weekend of Martin Luther King, we remember that goodness comes from the least expected places and those who are "the least of these" on earth will be "the greatest of these" in the Kingdom of Heaven. May we believe that, and live it now and always. Amen.