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Not Yet Home

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Not Yet Home

Luke De Koster

“He died so that we can stand here.”

As Pvt. Willy Thorne’s cortege and convoy rolled by, that statement was still echoing inside my head.

A middle-aged gentleman, waiting with me on the Rock Valley corner, had said it. He spoke in that unassuming, straightforward way I love about people from around here.

And I, back from Asia only a few days but already slipping back into dialect, had this helpless response:

“Yup—know whatcha mean.”

What else could I have said? It was a statement that established its own exclusive validity: simply by saying it, the speaker announced to himself and to others that this—and no other—could be true.

“Well, I think maybe there’s ... there might be some other reasons.”

Yeah, right. Would you equivocate in that situation? Would you reveal your reservations, however minor, about this grand project on which our country has embarked in the Middle East? Would

you question this man and his matter-of-fact patriotism?

I doubt it. But I wish I had.

I wish I had started the following conversation:

“Sir, I don’t mean to argue, but can I ask whatcha mean by that?”

“By what?”

“Whatcha just said—he died so we can stand here.”

“Well, you know, he and those boys are over there, fightin’ for our freedom.”

“Oh, okay. So for you, I mean, you feel threatened by this whole thing.”

“Darn right I do! We are under attack, sonny, and we gotta stand up for ourselves.”

“Yep, know whatcha mean—but I’m asking about this Willy kid. It’s just that, I guess, I thought he was trying to help those Iraqis rebuild their country. I never imagined that he was fightin’ for me.”

“Aren’t you an American? Of course he’s fightin’ for you—if we don’t fight, we’re gonna lose this place we got.”

This piece was published in the *Sioux County Index-Reporter* in mid-September 2006. The soldier mentioned in the article was from the area, and his body was being brought home via a convoy through towns along Highway 18. I happened to be covering a volleyball game in the town where he grew up and went to high school, so emotion was high at the four-way stop where I was standing. It struck me that we often dispense such generalities as “He died so that we can stand here” without really thinking—and this is the column that emerged.

I don't know when I would have stopped. I don't know what I would have been hoping to hear. But I do know why that man's statement made me uncomfortable.

"He died so that we can stand here" has a first cousin, equally a part of our American story: "He died to keep (or set) us free." And that gets awfully close to language that Christians ought only to use when we're speaking of Jesus Christ. There is only one name by which we can be saved—doesn't it say that somewhere?

Willy Thorne, you have done well for yourself. By dying for an ideal—freedom—you have set an example of how an American should act. By trying to help rebuild Iraq, you have shown the world why Americans deserve to be trusted.

But I don't feel that you have saved me ... from anything. My freedom to stand on a street corner is certainly not in danger, and apparently neither is my freedom to prate on about it in a newspaper. Since we don't have a draft, you haven't even saved me from having to go over there myself.

You can't save me. No matter how many flags

we drape over your coffin, no matter how golden the eulogies at your funeral, it can't change the fact that you were a human being, flawed and weak and finite.

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Christ Jesus our Lord!

Yes, we do need to be saved from evil in this world—indeed, in the very members of our own bodies, as Paul writes. Yes, our very existence is at stake. Yes, we need a savior.

But it is finished! And we need not fear. Neither death nor life, neither the present nor the future, neither terrorism nor Communism nor secularism ... all are vanquished in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Haven't you heard? He nailed them up there, humiliated them, was exalted to the right hand of the Father as he crushed them beneath his feet.

He died to make us free. And that's why I'm standing here.