

TRYING SMALL

Brian Palmer – ELCA Pastor/Missionary serving in Totota, Liberia



Totota's Struggle for Healing

Most of you know that I live in a small town in somewhat rural Liberia called Totota. Some of you may have noticed that Totota made the international news recently. On Tuesday, December 26, tragedy struck Totota when a tanker truck, carrying 9000 gallons of gas, overturned at about 3 PM. The events that unfolded after the accident are both ugly and a testimony to the fragility of life. A huge crowd gathered around the truck, predominantly consisting of young men and children seeking a quick buck, most of them well aware of the risk.

About an hour after the original accident, the tanker caught fire. As of January 4, the numbers I've heard reported are: 84 dead with 30 reported as missing, presumed to have been reduced to ashes; 10 persons whose remains were on the periphery of the fire, and 109 were initially taken to hospitals scattered around the country. Most

days, we hear of more people dying in the hospital from their injuries.

I don't really recommend it, but you can see a video of the incident on Facebook or Youtube. Simply search for "Totota fire" and then tell the search engine that you really want Totota and not Toyota.

Every day since the fire, I hear stories. Here are some:

- A sad story: A "big belly" (pregnant woman) went to retrieve her son, who was helping her husband get gas. It was as she was leading her son out of the danger zone when the truck ignited. The big-belly, her son, and her husband all died in the fire.
- A near-miss story: A 15-year-old named Abednego was in the middle of the gasoline river flowing from the tanker, using the cushion of an

old motorcycle seat as a sponge to soak up the money. His friend came and asked to use the sponge, and Abednego agreed. After a few minutes, Abednego decided to go to the Sanoyea junction to get another motorcycle seat, and it was while he was returning to the tanker that the gasoline ignited. Abednego shook with fear and spent the next several days stunned at the thought of what nearly happened to him. The friend who borrowed the sponge is among the dead.

- A West African spirituality story: Some claim they witnessed a gina in the smoke above the burning truck. Gina is a Liberian term for a spiritual being. The claim is they saw a gina that looked like a lion's head with its open mouth.
- A story of ignorance: As the fire burned, people started to wonder how the death toll might be determined. Many were under the impression that the "human heart can't burn" and that the death toll would be determined by counting hearts left behind.

Who is to blame for all this? Many witnesses say the truck driver was driving recklessly fast, and many more witnesses say they could see the steering wheel wildly shaking in the driver's hands immediately before the accident. The Totota police were quickly on the scene. In the end, six of them were badly burnt. The word on the street is that one brought a taser, and the fire started when a young man grabbed the taser from the police officer's holster and used it on the truck itself in an attempt to get people to leave the area. So, who is responsible? It seems to me there are lots of

options: 1) Truck owner, 2) Truck driver, 3) Police, 4) the man who grabbed the taser. Perhaps we could look more deeply and put the blame on greed spurred on by poverty, spurred on by rampant corruption. Maybe this is a good time to think about the words of Rabbi Abraham Heschel, "Few are guilty, all are responsible."

Since the fire, Totota has been a very quiet place. Many businesses have been closed as the business owners tend to family matters. Normally, in a small community when a person dies, everyone can focus on the 1 or the family of the 1. This is different. Everyone is bereaved. I heard someone say, "sorrow is all over." As I walk on the road to buy my bread, I can feel the quiet condolences passing in every interaction.

Psalm 34:18 says, "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." Hebrew poetry is not like English poetry. In English poetry, we repeat sounds by using words that rhyme. In Hebrew poetry, it is ideas that are repeated, not sounds. Perhaps what the psalmist is saying here is that being near the Lord is the same as being saved by the Lord. I like that. The one thing I know for sure is that the air in Totota is thick with the Spirit of the LORD. May God bless you all.