

“A Rescue Story”
Luke 10:25-37
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 23, 2018
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

In the aftermath of Hurricane Florence, a news station reported a story that occurred this past Monday in Fayetteville, North Carolina.

Michael Morris and Kathy Griffin found themselves in danger when they tried to cross a flooded road next to a nearby river.

Morris lost his balance and the pair were swept off their feet by the fast-moving water, which was carrying them toward the guard rail along the side of the road. They managed to grab hold of the guard rail, which kept them from going any farther...but soon they began to get tired.

It was hard to hold on, with the water rushing against them.
If they let go of the guard rail, of course, the flooded river would sweep them under and away and—in all likelihood—they would drown.

"She kept going under, and I would lose my footing, until I could find the asphalt," Morris explained. "I would pick her back up and put her on the guard rail."

And then the same thing would happen again.

Morris says they were clinging for dear life for about 20 minutes before three good Samaritans heard their call for help. The three strangers waded into the flood water to carry them to safety just as Griffin started to slip under the bridge.

One of the unidentified good Samaritans said he was trying to find a way out of the neighborhood with his own family when he heard their cries for help.

The fire department arrived later and the couple thanked the three men who saved their lives.¹

¹ Reported on September 19, 2018, found at <https://abc11.com/strangers-save-2-people-in-dramatic-flooding-rescue/4285260/>.

Now...you heard it, and I heard it.
Those three men who saved that couple...how did the news station refer to them?

Not just as heroes, not just a courageous strangers.
They were described as Good Samaritans.

Good Samaritans...was that a Good Samaritan story?
On the one hand, absolutely!

You see, our parable for today is not just about one person helping another person on any old road.

The road in our text was a DANGEROUS road.
The road from Jerusalem to Jericho was filled with traps, with bandits.

The Samaritan could have been robbed or beaten or killed himself when he stopped to give aid the wounded man. To risk life and limb for a stranger...that's very much what the Samaritan did, and it's very much what those three men in Fayetteville did, right?

They could have been overwhelmed by the river.
They could have lost their own lives in the river.

The news station got it right...those men were truly Good Samaritans.

But on the other hand, there's a part of me that RESISTS hearing that news story as a Good Samaritan story. Not because of those three courageous rescuers. But because of me.

After all...Jesus says, "Go and do likewise."
And I'd like to think that I would do what they did.

But who knows if I would do what they did?
Would I have the courage to go into the floodwaters by myself?
Or would I calculate the odds, call 911, and hope that they could hold on until the professional helpers arrive?

I just don't know...

What I do know is that when I locate myself in the parable, I'm always caught between whether I'm acting like the good Samaritan, or whether I'm being too cautious, like the Levite and the priest.

But those are not the only characters in this story.
You know what I never say, when I hear this story?
I never say, "Gosh, I'm just like the wounded man."

Why is that?
All the times you've heard this story—how many times have you thought of yourself as the person left for dead on the side of the road?

Do you ever hear the story that way?
I never hear the story that way.
Why don't I hear the story that way?

Maybe, in my own life, it has something to do with my own neurosis about being wounded, needing help.

I recall when I first started out in ministry, 20 years ago.

I had just moved to Dallas for the first time, was living on my own, and I got home from leading the youth group one evening, and I was tired. I started making myself dinner. And as I was cutting an onion, I wasn't paying attention and I put my thumb in the wrong place and sliced into it.

It started bleeding,
and I was by myself,
and as I had water running over it, I started feeling faint.

Three months into living in a new city, I didn't really know anyone, and because I tend to think in these worst case scenarios, what raced through my mind at that moment was this picture of me fainting, and no one knowing, and blood is rushing out of me...

So I decided, at that moment, that it would be a good idea to call 911.

Well, the operator asked what was the emergency?

I said, "I cut my thumb."

He said, "How bad is it?"

It wasn't that bad. But I was working myself into a panic.

"It's really bleeding, and I'm feeling faint, and..."

"Ok, calm down," said the operator. "Gently sit on the floor, put your hand above your head, we'll send someone over right away."

Two minutes later, I can hear the sirens, and a big FIRETRUCK comes pulling up to the apartment. Three firemen come rushing inside, one guy comes over to me, takes a look at my thumb—

"Did I reach the bone? Am I going to need stitches? How bad is it?" I asked.

"I think this will help," he said.

And the fireman reaches into his bag, and offers me...a BAND-AID.

So sometimes it's an embarrassing thing, right?

To look at our wounds...but it can also be a painful thing.

A difficult thing.

To see ourselves as wounded.

After all, the man on the road in Jesus' parable cannot heal his own wound.

He's helpless, right?

He doesn't need a band-aid...he needs to be rescued.

And none of us like being in that position.

- When a loved one has an illness that won't go away,
and we can't do anything to stop it.

- When your job disappears, and you try to find work, and the months start going by, and still...nothing is coming your way.

We don't want to be HELPLESS, or see ourselves as helpless.

We're taught to believe:
 "God helps those who help themselves."

I think Leigh's class covered this one the other week.

Where is it from?
 Which book of the Bible?
 It's not in the Bible, right?

One early version of this saying appears in *Poor Richard's Almanac*.
 The gospel according to Benjamin Franklin.²

But the gospel according to Jesus tells us something else.
 It says that you and I need help.
 It says that you and I cannot live without God's help.

In fact, it says even more than that.

It says that the most fundamental reality of our lives is that we need to be rescued.

From our sin, from our selfishness, from our fear...

We may strive every day to be helpful people, to be like the Good Samaritan. But the deeper reality is that all of us are, in one way or another, **helpless** people.

It's a reality that's not always easy to accept.

² For this citation, I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Fleming Rutledge, "Quoting the Good News Right," in *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Sermons from Paul's Letter to the Romans*, Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2007. I am also indebted to the Rev. Leigh Stuckey's class on this topic at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, which clarified that the phrase originated with the British theorist Algernon Sidney in 1698.

The president of Princeton Seminary, Craig Barnes, tells of meeting with a young couple named Mike and Sue for pre-marital counseling earlier in his career.

When they showed up for their last meeting, Barnes was thinking that they had covered the necessary ground and all that was left was to plan the wedding itself.

But as they began, Mike blurts out, "I have to say that I'm terrified."
This got Sue's attention real fast, and her eyes started welling up with tears.

So Mike said, "Oh, baby, I am not afraid of marrying you. I am afraid of losing you. My mother died when I was a teenager, and I love you more than her. What I fear is losing you."

Barnes writes:

"Then Mike looked at me with big, puppy dog eyes, and I knew what he wanted me to say. He was hoping I would say, 'Oh, Mike, what are you worried about? You are young and you have your whole lives before you.'

"But, of course, I could not say that because I have buried too many young people."

So instead, Barnes said to the couple: "In my experience, one hundred percent of marriages come to an end, and you are not going to beat those odds."

Mike protested: "What do you mean?"
Barnes went on.

"Let's think through the best scenario for the two of you. Let's say you have seventy years together, becoming more and more passionate until your souls are so interwoven that you do not know who you are without each other. Still, at the end, one of you is going to have to lay the other one into the arms of God, and that will rip your heart out of your chest.

Then Barnes got to his point:

"I say give her up today."

He didn't mean stop the marriage. He meant stop trying to control what would happen.

“I say give her up today. Place her back into the arms of the God who loaned her to you...Stop thinking about what you are holding, and start thinking about the grace that will always hold you.”³

Now I've never given that advice in premarital counseling before.
But it's good advice...not just for couples about to be married,
but for all of us.

To stop trying to control what happens with our lives, or with our loved ones' lives...and to place it all in the astonishing, gracious, surprising hands of God...

That's our sermon series word for today, by the way.
The word SURPRISE.

The good news of the gospel is that God will save us, God will rescue us. The hard part is that we don't get to determine when and how and through whom God will show up.

Sometimes God will arrive in ways that are familiar, predictable. And many times—according to the Bible—when God shows up, it's going to be a surprise.

Which is, I think, one reason why Jesus told the parable we heard today.

God's rescue comes in the form of a Samaritan in this story.
You know what the problem there was, right?

Samaritans were social outcasts, religious heretics.
A Samaritan as the hero of the story?
That's not how Jesus' audience would have wanted to hear this story.

³ Told by the Rev. Dr. M. Craig Barnes in his sermon “Putting Life Together,” preached at Shadyside Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, PA, September 23, 2012.

Maybe make the Samaritan the wounded man.
 Make the Samaritan the helpless man, and the followers of Jesus can rescue him!

Don't make him the one who rescues the wounded man.
 Don't make the Samaritan the primary vehicle for God's grace.

But that's precisely what Jesus does.
 Jesus tells us that God's grace will come, God's rescue will arrive, but we don't get to control it.

Have you ever been in a position in your life in which you wanted something—you were DESPERATE for something—and you really wanted to control it, and you knew, no matter what you did, you were in no position to control it?

Father Gregory Boyle has dedicated his life to working with gang members in Los Angeles.

He's received numerous accolades for his work.
 The difference that Boyle has made in the lives of these gang members is nothing short of astonishing.

But not all of his efforts go as he wishes.
 Sometimes, they just seem inclined to resist—like their woundedness just runs way too deep.

“Joey,” writes Boyle, “is one of these... At 21 years old, he seems eternally adolescent... shiftlessness has become his life, and for all the pointing I make in the general direction of possible exits, all are politely shrugged away.”

But then one morning Joey shows up in Father Boyle's office.

“Get ready to be proud of me,” he says, settling in. “You are talking to an employed *vato* right now.”

“Seriously?” Boyle responds. “So where you workin’?”

Joey turns around to make sure no one is lurking nearby.

“Now that’s the thing, dog,” he says, lowering his voice and moving closer...

“You have to promise not to tell the homies.”

Boyle agrees.

“Well, I’m working at Chuck E. Cheese.”

“Well...that’s great, son,” Boyle replies, feeling his nose start to grow as he even speaks those words.

“But what do you do there?”

“But that’s the thing. You can’t tell the homies.”

Boyle nods.

Joeys whispers, “I’m the rat.”

For those of you not acquainted with the wonders of Chuck E. Cheese, the rat is the mascot. The rat IS Chuck E. Cheese.

“Wow...that’s great,” replies Boyle.

“No, it ain’t...it [stinks],” says Joey. “The rat suit is aaaallll hot, and it be hummin’ in there, and the kids be buuuuuugggginnnn...”

“I’m proud of you,” says Boyle. “But what woke you up enough to go apply for a job?”

Joey gets sober and clear-eyed, and there is no doubting how he was led to this moment and place in a rat suit.

“In two months, my son’s gonna be born. I want him to come into the world and meet his father—a workin’ man.”⁴

⁴ Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*, New York: Free Press, 2010.

So these are the kids that Boyle helps.

On another occasion, Boyle is on a trip to Montana to give a speech. He brings two former gang members with him, Julian and Matteo. They're not yet 20 years old, but each has already been incarcerated for a quarter of his life.

They're flying from the only city they've ever known, Los Angeles, so needless to say, they've never experienced snow before. But the snow is plentiful in Montana, and as soon as they land, they dive right in, throwing snowballs, finding plastic sleds...as Boyle puts it, "in one afternoon [they] live an entire childhood previously denied them."

Now Boyle has brought Julian and Matteo with him so that they can speak of their own life experience, what it was like to be in a gang, what it was that got them out of their gangs. Before Boyle's speech at the university, all three are interviewed by the local paper. When all is said and done, Julian and Matteo receive a standing ovation.

In fact, the next day—on the front page of the Helena newspaper—the headline reads:

"Gang Members Visit Helena with a Message of Hope"

So Gregory Boyle has dedicated his life to working with people whose wounds run very deep.

But it's not as though all of us can be easily divided up into the wounded and the healed, right?

During this trip, Boyle is dealing with his own wound, in the form of the cancer that he's battling.

And after the talks, there was a worship service.

As Boyle puts it, "to my great embarrassment, the chaplain at the university ends the liturgy by inviting the congregation to come forward and lay hands on me for healing of my [cancer]."

"This is, as they say, not my cup of tea."

“Mortified, I stand there as, one by one, folks come up. Generally, they just lay hands and are silent. Some say things, a blessing or a prayer.”

Then Matteo comes up.

Boyle’s head is inclined and his eyes are closed.
Matteo takes Father Gregory Boyle’s head, and puts it in a vice grip.
Matteo is trembling and squeezing Boyle with all his might.

As he does this, he leans right into Boyle’s ear and can barely speak through his crying.

“All I know,” Matteo whispers, enunciating with special care, “is that...I love you...so [freakin’] much.”⁵

Now God’s grip may be a bit more gentle than Matteo’s... but let me remind you that it is no less strong.

God holds each of us.
Not because we are such helpful people, but because we are God’s children.

And because God knows that all of us...every single soul in this room today...is in need of God’s help.

Have you thought of the help you need right now?
The wound that’s so tender, you keep your defenses very high?
And you say to yourself, “No one will get me THERE!”

My prayer for you today is that SOMEONE will go there with you.
That God will send someone into your life.
Someone who slips behind your defenses,
offering a blessing that will ASTONISH you,
a peace, and a wholeness...a gift you never saw coming...

Amen.

⁵ Ibid.