

“Be a Helper”

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Acts 16:9-15

John 5:1-9

*‘During the night, Paul had a vision of someone from Macedonia
who was standing there and begging him,
“Come over to Macedonia and help us!”’*

Acts 16:9

Let us pray... O God,
Make us ready to help by listening and having our eyes open to see the need.
May we be willing to ask when there is a need.

Amen

The Apostle Paul received a vision – and it is not clear if this vision had been in the form of a dream or something he may have seen while meditating, but he interpreted this vision as a call for help from the people of Macedonia – north of what is now Greece. Earlier, Paul had been prevented by the Holy Spirit from going into ‘Asia’ – which in Paul’s time referred to a part of Turkey and was not the Far East. We don’t know how the Holy Spirit communicated this to him, but the Macedonian call for help seems to be a follow-up, clarification of “where to next” for Paul’s missionary journey. This was a stepping stone to Europe where Christianity would take root over the course of 400 years.

In whatever way Paul experienced such ‘visions’, they served as an effective means of communication for what God wanted him to do.
Can you imagine what the ancient people would have thought about our means of communication these days?
They would probably think it was some kind of magic.

Probably for many of us, all the different kinds of communication technologies available to us, are still kind of like magic.
But can you still remember what it was like not to have a cell phone?
Can you recall there was a time when someone couldn’t reach you by phone?
Technology has helped us stay connected –
and haven’t we grown accustomed to its convenience?
Copiers are the same thing? What did we do before there were copiers?
Do remember having to type things in triplicate, using carbon paper, and to erase something, you had to white it out – or start over?

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It's just amazing to realize the technological achievements we take for granted – they have made our lives so much easier, while being intrusive, too. Yet it seems hard to remember how we lived *before* these things?

E-mail – like cell phones and other social media including Facebook, allow us to receive all kinds of messages, images, videos – and spam. How many times have you received inspirational messages, pictures, and jokes sent *ad nauseum* by well-meaning friends or strangers who slipped by your junk mail filter?

When they come with the subtle pressure of 'forward this to 10 friends' – or else, then they slip into that category of what used to be called chain letters – in which case, they would go directly to "File 13", the trash bin.

Every now and then, something stands out as a keeper, though, and there have been some inspiring messages and images recently, that made the rounds in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon Bombing. One was a picture of Fred Rogers – "MisterRogers" of public TV with a quote attributed to him that said, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"

That was very true about the Boston Marathon Bombing which was evident in the video footage of people of the crowd, rushing in, even before first responders, to help those who were wounded.

I happened to find a photograph of a street scene right after one of the explosions, showing a man pulling off his red t-shirt to help a woman lying on the street.

He was literally taking the shirt off his back, to answer the call to help this person – which is the image for our bulletin cover today.

There's another photograph that was being circulated, showing apparently this same man in the red shirt, crouching over this woman, who had been severely injured, pressing his forehead to hers to comfort her – perhaps to pray. This woman's name is Sidney Corcoran and she had been wounded in her thigh. Two other men showed up and performed first aid, applying pressure to the wound to stop the bleeding.

They answered the call to help and ultimately saved Sydney's leg and her life.

Not far away from Sydney, was her mother, Celeste Corcoran, who was lying on the ground with both legs severely injured.

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In a follow up report from National Public Radio about these two women,
the mother, Celeste Corcoran, lost both her legs.
In the midst of this traumatic event and its aftermath,
Celeste spoke of several turning points for her...

At first, she said to herself:

*"I wanted to die because it hurt so bad.
I thought, 'I can't take this. I hope I just die...
then almost immediately ... I was just sort of like,
'Seriously, I do not want to die. I've got so much to do.
I've got my kids. I have my life. I have my husband.'
There was no way I wanted to die."*

The second turning point was a downturn –

It was after her last surgery and she still hadn't been able to clean up
from the street grit and the smell from the explosives,
and she was overwhelmed with weariness.

Celeste said,

*"I knew I was going to live and I was very grateful for that,
But I really was very discouraged about
what my quality of life was going to be.
I love going to the beach. That soothes me and really calms my spirit.
And I remember lying here crying and thinking
I wasn't going to be able to do that."*

Then one day, a US Marine walked into her room –

Gabe Martinez, a veteran from the War in Afghanistan
who had been wounded in the same way, having lost both legs.

He said to Celeste,

*"You know, I was just like you. I was just like this.
I felt helpless. I felt like I couldn't do anything for myself."*

He is part of a group of amputees called the Semper Fi Fund that provides counsel
for severely wounded vets.

The article goes on to say that Gabe Martinez

*'was the living proof Celeste needed that double amputees
don't have to be dependent invalids.
He was "steady as a rock" on his prosthetic legs...
telling [her, she] can be the exact same way.*

Martinez and a fellow amputee continued to visit, answering the call,
pledging to help Celeste and her daughter, Sydney, in their recovery.

And that was the third turning point for Celeste,

as a commitment she to answer the call to help heal herself...

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As she was preparing to leave the hospital for the next phase of her recovery at rehab, Celeste said,

"After I met [the two Marines], it was like this ... this little spark.

You know, it's really going to be OK.

Before then, I knew I was going to live.

I knew my loved ones were going to be around me.

But the independent me ... after that point,

it was like I got it that the sky's the limit.

Nothing was taken from me that I can't get back.

I can even be better than I was before."

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2013/05/01/180110959/mother-and-daughter-injured-in-boston-bombing-face-new-future>

In our gospel lesson today Jesus finds a crippled man sitting by a public pool famous for its healing properties.

The man is waiting for his turn to get into this water,

but he's gone there so often without success

that he's given up even asking for help.

Jesus sees this man and knowing the situation, just asks a question...

"Do you want to be well?"

He didn't put him in the pool, he just asked a question

and by asking that question Jesus was able to help this person

get involved in the process of his own healing.

Stories in traditional societies are a way of preserving the lore of a community and can even provide instructions for how to deal with life challenges.

Not far from where the Boston Marathon Bombing took place,

is the Boston Public Library and on the second floor of that library,

is a small alcove with a series of oil paintings by Edwin Austin Abbey.

They are in the classic style of illustration and tell the story of the Holy Grail.

A key part of the story involves the significance of asking a question.

When the knight, Galahad, fails to do this,

the land remains in a terrible state of desolation – like our own society.

But when he finally asks the question that needed to be asked,

he is able to find the Grail and bring healing to the land.

By 'asking the question' – and that is simply, whatever needs to be asked,

then we can help answer the call to heal the desolation, the woundedness,

and the isolation of people from each other.

By asking the question, with a willingness to listen,

we can hear the need and help others solve their own problem.

What question needs to be asked in your life as an individual?

What needs to be asked of us as a faith community?

What can we do to answer the call and truly be a help?

Amen

Our lesson today is from Acts 16:9-15.

*It describes the decision to carry the Gospel
to the western part of the Roman Empire.*

- 9 During the night, Paul had a vision of someone from Macedonia
who was standing there and begging him,
“Come over to Macedonia and help us!”
- 10 After Paul had seen the vision, we began looking for a way to go to Macedonia.
We were sure that God had called us to preach the good news there.
- 11 We sailed straight from Troas to Samothrace,
and the next day we arrived in Neapolis.
- 12 From there we went to Philippi,
which is a Roman colony in the first district of Macedonia.
We spent several days in Philippi.
- 13 Then on the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to a place by the river,
where we thought there would be a Jewish meeting place for prayer.
We sat down and talked with the women who came.
- 14 One of them was Lydia,
who was from the city of Thyatira and sold expensive purple cloth.
She was a worshiper of the Lord God,
and he made her willing to accept what Paul was saying.
- 15 Then after she and her family were baptized, she kept on begging us,
“If you think I really do have faith in the Lord, come stay in my home.”
Finally, we accepted her invitation.

John 5:1-9

- [1] After this there was a feast of the Jews,
and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.
- [2] Now there is in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate a pool,
in Hebrew called Beth-za'tha, which has five porticoes.
- [3] In these lay a multitude of invalids,
blind, lame, paralyzed.
- [5] One man was there,
who had been ill for thirty-eight years.
- [6] When Jesus saw him and knew that
he had been lying there a long time, he said to him,
"Do you want to be healed?"
- [7] The sick man answered him,
"Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is troubled,
and while I am going another steps down before me."
- [8] Jesus said to him,
"Rise, take up your pallet, and walk."
- [9] And at once the man was healed, and he took up his pallet and walked.
Now that day was the sabbath.