

“First Responders”

Acts 16:9-15

For over 30 years, my father was a volunteer fireman for the Valley City Fire Department where all the firemen are volunteers.

When I was growing up, my bedroom shared a wall with my parent's bedroom. Just on the other side of the wall on top of the dresser in my parent's bedroom was a large, black radio receiver. When someone dialed 911 for a fire, car accident, heart attack, or whatever in Liverpool Township, a very loud alarm would go off, followed by a woman's voice giving the address of the emergency. My Dad would quickly dress, jump in his pick-up, turn on the flashing lights on top, and often would arrive at a fire or a car accident as the first responder. Sometimes he encountered people who were badly injured or badly burned, or dead.

At his funeral back in 2003, I had total strangers coming up to me to tell me the story of how comforting my father was when they were trapped in mangled car or had narrowly escaped their burning home. After walking between fire trucks with their ladders extended to form an archway to the cemetery, we stood around the casket in a moment of silence that was suddenly broken when his “last call” came blaring over the rescue squad's radio.

“The people you see running in when everyone else is running out”.

That phrase has become a kind of definition of first responders – fire fighters, police officers, paramedics, and other emergency personnel.

Sadly, some of us first heard that description on 9/11, when numerous first responders did indeed run into the burning towers to rescue victims. But as the buildings collapsed, they never had a chance to come back out. They are rightly honored for their sacrifice.

It remains true today that emergency response workers are quick to go into dangerous situations to help others. But in some cases, they are not quite the *first* responders. In some emergencies, that role is filled by whoever happens to be on the spot — sometimes, persons who are not trained professionals in emergency response. Maybe it's a driver who witnesses a bad crash on the highway and stops to offer help. Or it's a passerby who sees a house on fire and rushes in to help the residents get out. Or perhaps it is someone at a mass shooting who directs people to shelter or to a way out of the building. Or, a person afterward who comforts a gravely-wounded victim who will die before emergency workers arrive.

In fact, in some emergencies, the first responder may be a child. Following the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, a coalition of organizations came together to develop a program called "Stop the Bleed," which teaches civilians how to administer first aid after a shooting. The program even supplies "bleed kits." On a *60 Minutes* report on CBS last year, Broward County Medical Director Dr. Peter Antevy said that his 12-year-old son was so afraid of returning to school following the Parkland shooting that Antevy decided to help him by training him in how to stop bleeding. "My first instinct was, 'He needs a bleeding kit,'" Antevy said.

We might also use the term “first responders” to characterize the entry of Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke into the district of Macedonia, which is the story told in the Acts reading for today.

While not summoned by a radio call or an alarm, as emergency workers usually are today, Paul and his coworkers received the 911 call through a nighttime vision in which a man from Macedonia pleaded, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” (v. 9) Paul’s team understood this as a call from God, and they realized that the help needed was a proclamation of the gospel in that region. Thus, they set sail from Troas, where the vision had occurred and soon were sharing the gospel in Philippi, the leading city of Macedonia.

What would be your response if you were told that you might be a first responder in someone’s search for faith.

Might it be, “Who, me? I’m no professional”?

Or you might say, “I would suggest you talk to my pastor.”

But *you’re* the one to whom the person addressed the 911 call — that is, the person has some connection to *you* that caused him or her to speak about the need. And because of that connection, you may be the one with the bleed kit to stop the person’s spiritual hemorrhaging.

While you may not have formal training, you can tell the person what your faith means to you.

Depending on your own experience of Christ, you may be able to address a person's sense of emptiness by saying that the gospel gives meaning to lives that seem to be without purpose and open the door for the person to share about their life and their relationships.

You may be able to address a person's loneliness, explaining that Christ is a comforting presence that helps you weather dark moments when you feel alone. Share a Bible reading like the 23rd Psalm and if they're open to it, pray with them.

You may be able to help a person face fear by talking about the calmness and spiritual strength the gospel fosters while encouraging them to talk about what's causing the fear.

You may be the one to tell the person about Stephen Ministry and how a Stephen Minister could be helpful.

In other words, you can be the one running *toward* that person totally by accident because you were in the right place at the right time. Or you could become trained as a Stephen Minister, preparing you to intentionally run toward the person in need.

Probably the clearest Macedonian call for us comes when, in normal conversation, someone invites us to be honest about our faith. Our text says that in Philippi, Paul sat down and spoke to some women whom he encountered in a place of prayer near the river. Not that he preached or tried to scare people about the terror of hell if they didn't receive Christ. He just spoke to them. He just listened to them.

Luke reports that one of those listening was Lydia, and that “the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.” Opened her heart? What does that mean if not that something was *bleeding* inside her? And that happens to lots of people.

It especially happens to our young men and women serving in the military. They need to have someone they trust that they can open their hearts to.

Jonathan Smithisler, a son of Divinity became that “first responder” to young men and women in the Army who needed someone who would listen to them and not judge them.

Jonathan graduated from Midpark High School in 2002 and joined the Army in 2003. His father Dennis was initially not too happy about the possibility of his son getting killed as we were heating up for war after the twin towers were destroyed. Dennis’ worries would triple when his next two sons, Jeff and Josh joined as well.

Jon and Jeff were at the same boot camp together at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. Jon then went to job training to learn to be a chaplain’s assistant. Jon was trained to help with worship, Holy Communion, how to give hugs, to be a good listener for those who didn’t want to go to the chaplain, how to help plan and implement marriage and single retreats, and quote “how to be the chaplain’s glorified bodyguard”. Jon carried a gun while chaplain did not.

Jon was deployed for just over a year in 2010-11 to Afghanistan where he helped run a chapel and was sent wherever he was needed, which included route clearance of IED’s, detonating IED’s, and a helicopter gunner. His brother Josh was stationed on a base about 2 hours away.

Jon helped distribute care packages from churches and businesses that were much appreciated by our troops. He also helped train Afghani soldiers.

Jon was honorably discharged in 2014 after serving for over 11 years. He has one son, Connor, who is finishing the 6th grade at Buckeye. Go Bucks!

Jon was a “first responder” through his presence with and caring for those who came to him during his 11 years in the Army. He shared his faith through his listening and serving.

How can we be “first responders” with our faith?

Our colleagues in the workplace or our friends in the neighborhood, or at the rec center or golf course may have a sense that our faith is important to us and that we go to church regularly. Most of our conversations with these acquaintances deal with routine, everyday things. But as we develop relationships with others, sometimes something more serious comes up.

Perhaps the other person asks for our opinion about some ethical matter or wants to talk about a personal problem — perfect opportunities to frankly share something about our faith.

Surely in moments like that, when someone is asking for information and inviting us to be a first responder, we can be unembarrassed witnesses for Christ and share our faith in an honest way.

First responders aren’t usually the ones who provide the whole solution. They’re the ones who do their best to stop the bleeding and then send the person to a place where more help is available.

If a moment comes where someone within our circle of acquaintances appears to be seeking faith, may God make us willing to be first responders.