

You Can Be A Lifesaver

Luke 10:25-37

Some of you may remember William Shatner's television show Rescue 911 shares my feelings of inadequacy. The show made you think that some guy hanging by his ankles off a 40-story building to rescue a stranded window washer is everyday stuff. One episode dealt with a three-year-old who saved his mother from a seizure. Someone told me of a dog who saved his entire family from a burning house. Me? I'm lucky once in a blue moon just to save somebody a parking space.

Most would deny ever having saved anyone's life. Very few have dragged another off a field of battle or pulled someone from a fiery car. To be sure, doctors, nurses and EMTs can tell stories of saving lives. For them, lifesaving is part of their daily routine. The rest of us, though, ordinarily do not see ourselves in that role. My guess, however, is that most of us do more lifesaving than we think. Educators do it. Sunday school teachers do it. Professional counselors do it. Parents do it. Coaches and good friends do it. Any time we exert any kind of influence that enhances life rather than diminishes it, we have become a lifesaver. How many frightened, abused children have almost given up hope until meeting that one teacher who made them feel loved, safe and worthy? How many lonely adults have been at the end of their rope, wondering if life were even worth the trouble anymore, but someone took the time to love them, to phone or drop by, to listen and in so doing to remind them that they were not alone? It may well be that in those moments somebody's life was saved -- from agony, depression, despair and maybe even from death itself.

Jesus taught that in the process of saving lives, we find life, life with meaning, dignity and purpose. Luke was getting at something like that when he told the story of a scribe who asked Jesus about finding life. Most translations interpret his question to mean: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" but the original Greek may indicate something of a bit broader scope. The scribe's question may have been about life in general, not just life on the other side of dying. He may well have been inquiring about life that is full and satisfying and worth having. "What must I do to really be alive? Not just to take up space and breathe air and function, but to live? What must I do to count for something?" And Jesus answered by telling him a story. "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves" Then came the famous parable of The Good Samaritan. In Christ's story the traveler is stripped, robbed, beaten and left for dead "in a ditch by the side of the road." It so happened as time passed that a priest and later a Levite saw the wounded traveler but "passed by on the other side ... But at last there came that way a Samaritan, and when he saw him he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds. And he put him on his horse and took him to an inn. Giving money to the innkeeper, he charged that the man should be tended, and if any additional money were needed, it should be put on his account." Then Jesus looked at the scribe who had asked the question about finding life worth having and said: "Go, and do likewise." Go and be like the Good Samaritan. Go out and find life by giving it away. For whenever you do anything to save or strengthen the life of another, in that very moment you will find your own.

In a real sense the parable of The Good Samaritan is a stewardship message. To be a good steward of one's time, talents or finances enables one to become involved in a ministry of lifesaving. One of the keyways in which we do what the Good Samaritan did is through church and charitable donations. Admittedly, this is skating on thin ice. Any mention of financial stewardship triggers mass nervousness. People immediately suspect the person doing the talking is about to become a kind of spiritual pickpocket, reaching as far into our wallets as humanly possible. And none of us is entirely comfortable with that. Things are tight. We have to be careful and conservative.

You may have heard it said Money talks and it does for some. However, Money does more than just talk. In the right hands used in the right ways, it saves lives and restores hope and heals hurts and builds futures.

In a church I once pastored was a woman named Evelyn. She lived alone in a small frame house less than a block from the church. She was a dear, sweet-natured lady who late in life developed diabetes and serious circulatory problems. Finally, she was told her survival depended upon having a leg amputated. Several months later the same surgery had to be performed on the other leg. Each surgery was expensive, especially for someone on a modest fixed income like Evelyn. Both times she phoned me and asked, "What can I do? I can't afford to have this procedure, but I can't survive

without it." Each time I contacted my denominational offices to seek help for a woman in need. Twice I was connected with something called The Golden Cross Fund, a ministry specifically set up to help individuals like Evelyn manage the high costs of health care. Both surgeries were successful, and Evelyn was given several additional years of life, joy and reasonable independence in her own home. On two different occasions she awoke in a major medical center, knowing that people whose faces she would never see brought tithes and offerings to their churches, and those folks had saved her life.

A village in Mozambique has been rampaged by war and ravaged by drought. Mary, a missionary there, is trained in nursing and agriculture. With the right farming equipment and medical supplies, she can help those people learn to dig wells, plant crops, irrigate fields, heal hurts and find hope. And Mary does precisely those things every day because churches back in the states collect monies and forward them to her.

One of the most tragic statistics I know is this: Every day in our world, 40,000 children starve. In the same amount of time that most worship services last, 1,667 little children die in their mothers' arms because there is no food. As tragic as that is and as unacceptable in a world like ours, one of the most inspiring statistics I know comes from our own denomination. One million children do not starve every day because our denomination, our church feeds them. One million children have food in their stomachs and hope in their hearts because believers far away care enough to send it to them. Their survival is the result of our willingness to give tithes and offerings. Forty-two thousand children per hour per day 365 days a year are fed. That is Christian stewardship in action. Because of You, Our Church Changes Lives.

The most sacred title by which Jesus is known is "Savior" one who gave of himself to save others. That is what he calls us to do, as well ... oh, not on a cross as he did and not usually in a manner flashy enough to make shows like Rescue 911. But in the simple act of being faithful stewards, we become lifesavers.

Admittedly stewardship is a multi-faceted word. It involves far more than mere finances. What we do with our time and talents is of paramount concern. Too often, though, financial stewardship is mentioned with embarrassment, apologetically as if the topic is somehow no better than part of Christianity's underbelly. In truth, what we allow the Church to do with our money has the very real potential to save and enhance human lives. Only by embarking on the journey to save the lives of others will we ever find life that is worth having for ourselves.