

“Life: A Hero’s Story” / Unit 3: Rescuers

Sermon 4: “To the ends of the earth” / November 24, 2019

Key Texts: Acts 1.8; Matthew 28.18-20; Mark 16.15; Luke 24.46-47; Matthew 5.16

Key Words: RIP Medical Debt, Extreme altruism, Carnegie Hero Fund, Strangers, Evangelism, Empathy, Missions

Summary: There is something in us that compels us to try to rescue a stranger. Perhaps that is a reflection of the image of God in us. And the nobility we feel when we try to rescue some stranger physically pales compared to rescuing some stranger spiritually. Jesus’ call for us to be his witnesses may be his greatest gift to us.

On September 1 of this year we did something weird. We told you guys that, unless otherwise designated, we were going to give away all the money that came in that day. We had researched a group called RIP Medical Debt, an organization that was buying medical debt for pennies on the dollar, and then just paying it off. They had made national news. They were being supported by news organizations and churches across our country. And we had the opportunity to do something good for people we didn’t know in our own state.

Our target was about \$22,000, which would purchase over \$2 million dollars in qualifiable medical debt for about 1300 people in Franklin County, and several of the counties around us. And for some reason, the people in this church family got excited ... really excited. And instead of \$22 grand, we raised in the ballpark of \$95,000! Un ... believable! And instead of purchasing \$2 million in medical debt for Franklin and a few other counties around us, with an additional \$5 grand from Hillcrest Baptist, we settled \$10,548,199.19 of medical debt for 11,836 debtors from about 27 counties in Kentucky, and for some reason about 19 people in Indiana, 4 in Ohio, and even 1 in Nebraska.

Why!? Why did our church family respond that way? Why did we get all excited about helping people we don’t know? In fact, we couldn’t know! We couldn’t pick and choose who’d get our help. Some computers did that, based on some algorithms that factored in income levels, age of debt, stuff like that. So, why did this church family step up that Sunday and give about 4 times as much as we would normally receive in a week of giving? The letters will be going out to those whose debts have been settled in a week or so. Why are we so excited about the tears that are about to be shed? And the hope we have that maybe a few – maybe a few – will be nudged towards Jesus. We don’t know these people! Why does helping them stir us so?

You see, what we did is the kind of thing that always stirs good people. We tried helping people we don’t know. We gave over and above, for some, even sacrificially, to help people we don’t know. And that’s cool! And it’s so cool that it stirs us!

Good people in our culture honor our soldiers, don't we? And how many times have our soldiers stood in harm's way for people they don't know? My son, Andy, spent a year in Bosnia -- protecting Muslims -- from Christians -- who were bent on an "ethnic cleansing." I was proud of him. And good people in our culture honor our first responders, don't we? As we should. The cops, the firemen, the paramedics who run towards danger, rather than away from it, usually to help people they don't know! I know, they are paid to do it ... but not enough. Why do their stories stir us so?!

And then there are others, who aren't paid to run towards danger, but they do anyway. Darryl Starnes, 71, and Curtis Combs, 49, driving separately, both stopped when they saw a car that had crashed and was becoming engulfed in flames near Richmond, Virginia. One of them jumped in the passenger window, the other worked leaning through the driver's window to untangle a woman they didn't know from her seatbelt as the flames were spreading into the passenger compartment. The old guy said, "I just did what I felt like I needed to do. You don't think." Why is it that he felt like it was he needed to do? What's inside us that makes us feel that, and that honor that?

Christine Marty, a Pittsburgh college student, was driving home with her mom when they were caught in a flash flood. They escaped their car, but then Christine found 69 year-old Romy Connolly trapped in another car. The older woman couldn't swim, she had cancer, and she was panicking. She said, "I'm losing strength, I think I'm just going to let go." Christine said, "No you're not! There's no way you're going to let go." She prayed, she talked, she sang, and she saved the older woman's life. ... Guys, why is that so cool! A college kid rescues a 69 year-old woman she didn't know from a flooding car, and she says, "I'm thankful I was able to act and not think about it." Why do stories of self-sacrifice like that grip us so? Why wouldn't we just shake our heads and mock such "heroes" for being reckless, and stupid?

There's an organization called the Carnegie Hero Fund. They have awarded over 10,000 Carnegie Medals since it was founded in 1904 by Andrew Carnegie. They are there to honor civilians who risk their lives to rescue someone, usually total strangers. Here are three of the 6 criteria:

- The rescuer must be a civilian who knowingly and voluntarily risks his or her own life to an extraordinary degree.
- The rescuer must have rescued or attempted the rescue of another person.
- The act of rescue must be one in which no full measure of responsibility exists between the rescuer and the rescued. Which means ... it wasn't their job; they weren't paid to risk their life. They just did it.

You read their stories, and it's just ordinary people doing extraordinary things. Because there is something inside them ... something inside us. People who study this stuff call it "extreme altruism"; I would call it, "altruism on steroids." They are stories that make no sense from an evolutionary perspective. You see, nature is

driven by the survival of the fittest. You don't sacrifice the strong for the weak! So those with no sense of God are the ones most confused by these stories. Why would any creature, driven by the need to survive, reproduce, and take care of its own, why would any creature do things like these, or even honor things like these?

It's interesting to me that those who study this stuff say that it's a "first instinct." Darryl says, "I just did what I felt like I needed to do. You don't think." Christine says, "I'm thankful I was able to act and not think about it." Because there is something inside us that leans towards helping someone we don't know, no matter the cost. Something it's really not ... rational. It's a: "It's not about me. It's not about my pain. It's not about how my loss might affect my family. Someone needs help, and I'm the one who can try!"

How many of you old guys know the name, "Todd Beamer"? He was an Account Manager, a fan of the Bulls, the Bears, and the Cubs. A Sunday School teacher ... a fierce Christian. It was September 11, 2001. He's on United Airlines Flight 93, when it's hijacked by terrorists. The terrorists kill one passenger, force the pilot and co-pilot out of the cockpit, and turn the plane towards Washington. The passengers learned of the attacks on New York City, and the Pentagon, and they figured out their plane was next. So Beamer and some others decided it was time to act, no matter what the cost. He recited the Lord's Prayer, and the 23rd Psalm, and then Beamer says, "Let's roll!" "Let's roll!" And they crashed the plane, before the terrorists could use it as a weapon. And his words became a rallying cry. Instead of, "If it feels good, do it!", instead of "Look out for #1," for a time it was, "Let's roll!" How cool is that! We might not win, we might not survive, but it's right, and it's good, and it's noble. So, Let's roll! That stirs something in us, doesn't it?

And think of it like this: all these stories – all these stories – have been about people risking their lives to save the physical life of some stranger. Listen: How much more right, and how much more good, and how much more noble when a man or a woman, created in the image of God, does whatever it takes to save the spiritual life of some stranger? You see, everyone we save physically will die eventually, anyway. But anyone who is saved spiritually ... gets eternal life! Do you buy that? Do you get that?! Talk about heroes!

My parents were ... pretty ordinary, pretty ordinary Jesus followers ... people like most of you guys. For some reason they were gripped by the possibility of sharing Jesus with strangers. They weren't young, starry eyed kids. They had 7 kids of their own. Four of us were college age or beyond ... just about ready to start popping out grandkids, which is pretty much the only thing kids are good for, right? My mom was so ready for grandkids! Well, they packed up my youngest brother, and two youngest sisters, and headed to Africa, where they spent the next 12 years. Why would they do that? Those 12 years beat both of them down physically, and absolutely crushed

them financially. Dysentery, malaria, hepatitis ... poverty. Just to establish several churches, and baptize hundreds. Was it worth it? Are they heroes? Superheroes?

Our budget here at CapCity next year will include support for three of our own. Chris and Marissa Dove have moved to the Dominican Republic, taking Jesus to people I don't know, and you don't know, and they don't know ... yet. And I'm excited to help them, aren't you? Why is that? Danielle Thomas is working with at-risk kids down in Louisiana. And I'm excited to help her. Aren't you? Cameron dreams of sharing Jesus with Muslims. That's where his heart is. How gutsy is that?! I'm so proud of him! Aren't you?

Guys, I don't think you can understand this stuff without some sense of God. Why are we moved to sacrifice for those we don't know? Why are we so stirred by such stories of selfless, sometimes self-destructive love? And do you understand that extreme altruism is at its most extreme when we are bringing people face to face with Jesus, not matter what the cost? Saving a life is so cool! Saving a soul ... that is flat out forever! So ... So ... when Jesus says, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea (at home), and you shall be my witnesses in Samaria (even taking Jesus to those you don't like, and who don't like you), and you shall even be my witnesses to the ends of the earth ... he's not dumping on us some oppressive burden, he's giving us an amazing gift!

Jesus says it a lot. The most famous is what we call "the Great Commission," Matthew 28.18-20, the last words of Matthew's story of Jesus. Jesus says, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. (Which means, this is coming from the top! He says,) Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations (all of them, everywhere), baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. (And) Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always (you'll never be alone!), even to the end of the age."

Those words mean so much to us here at Cap City that they are the heart of our mission statement, our reason for being, the reason we exist. It's out on the wall in our foyer: "Go and make Christ-Driven, 24-7 Jesus followers." (Matthew 28.19) And we don't think that means just Frankfort, or Franklin County, or Central Kentucky. We think that means everywhere we can. All of us, together, everywhere we can.

The Gospel of Mark, Mark's story of Jesus, has some disputed verses at the end of the book. But whoever wrote those verses got this part right. Jesus says, "Go into all the world (all the world) and preach the Good News to everyone (everywhere). (Mark 16.15) That's his commission to us; that's his gift to us. The Hero of heroes has changed your life. So, go tell people about him, even people you don't know!

The Gospel of Luke, Luke's story of Jesus, puts it like this. Jesus says, "It was written long ago that the Messiah (that's me, Jesus says; the Messiah) would suffer and die

and rise from the dead on the third day. (Done!) It was also written that this message would be proclaimed in the authority of his name to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem (and that's our job! Because ...): 'There is forgiveness of sins for all who repent.' (Luke 24.46-47) How cool is that! How would you like to be the one to bring the words that will change a life, and save a life, forever? Well, that's what we get to do!

So, in the verse we've been unpacking for the past month, Jesus' final words before he goes back to heaven, he says, to us, "You will receive power (you will receive power) when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, (you will) telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and (even) to the ends of the earth (even to people you don't know; even to people whose lives will never intersect with yours, otherwise)." (Acts 1.8)

Those are his orders, clearly. So, we do it. But ... why? Just because he tells us to? Just because he's the boss and those are his orders, so, doggone it, I guess we have to. Just because we might get punished somehow if we don't? He's God, right? And it's pretty stupid to blow God off, right? Really stupid! So, like it or not, I guess we have to try! Is that it?

Not even close! Listen, guys: there is something in us that lights up when we share Jesus. I think it's the image of God in us. You're not just an animal. Some people think you are ... just slightly more evolved animals. But you are different. Of all the creatures on earth you were created in the image of God. So there is something in you that is stirred by what stirs God. We smother his image in us up sometimes, or force it down. But there's a deep, deep drive in our God to save -- people. There's a deep, deep drive in our God, to save people no matter what the cost. Our God is stunningly selfless! And he planted that stuff in you. So there's this passion in you to save someone who is hurting or lost. And there's even this willingness to save no matter what the cost. There's a part of you, down deep somewhere that is stunningly selfless. Because you were created in the image of God. And when we feed that side of who we are, life can get so rich!

It's part of this weird thing we call "empathy." God planted in us the ability to understand and to feel the needs and the emotions of another ... and care ... whether we know them or not. It's in us even as babies. They tell us that a baby will cry when another baby cries. It's not just the noise. They can play some equally loud and equally piercing sound and a baby doesn't respond the same way. They are responding to another person's needs and emotions, even as babies ... we care! Now we can quench that empathy. You can raise a kid who is totally self-absorbed, and they will be quite skilled at blowing off the needs and emotions of others. Self-absorbed twits are all around us! But if a kid is raised right, if that selfless part of who we are is cultivated, we can become amazing people, sometimes bigger than life.

Listen – this is going to sound weird – listen: You were created in the image of God. You are not an animal! You were created in the image of God! You are the most fully human when the image of God part of you dances.

- I know there are some who just live for themselves. They go through life self-absorbed: what I want, what I like, what I need, what makes me happy, how I can get ahead... They think that's because they are "only human." No! Those are the least human of us; they are the most beastly! They are those who have repressed the image of God in them most successfully. We are at our most human when we reflect the image of God in us.
- There are others who expand their circle a bit. They both live for themselves, and their own. My family, my friends, those I like, those who like me. Their circle of care is a little but wider. They are perhaps a little more human than those who are entirely self-absorbed, but only slightly. They still don't get it. They are still repressing the image of God in them. They are still "little people."
- And there are some who get it. And they actually begin to see people with God's eyes. They begin to feel what he feels, and do what he does. And they live outside themselves. And they – they – are the most fully human. And theirs – theirs – are the richest lives. Jesus says, "I came that you might have life to the fullest." And those who live outside themselves get the closest.

So why do we care? Why do we care about taking Jesus to those we don't know? Because God has planted something of himself in us. That's who God is; that's what God does; that's what God did. And we were made to be like him. So when the image of God in us dances. that's when life dances. So Let's roll!

And that's why taking Jesus to those we don't know is a really big part of who we are together as a church. Sometimes it's for those close by, and sometimes it doesn't seem like it's very "spiritual."

- This is week 4 of Feed the Need. We have a food pantry here in Frankfort that will serve thousands of families over the course of a year. We are a really big piece of that. I think we're their biggest supporter. We send truckloads of food over to the food pantry. We'll send another load over there this morning. Do you think we're doing this just to fill some empty stomachs?
- Next week we'll start our giving wall. There will be a wall in our foyer with a bunch of these little paper ornaments. Each ornament will designate some gift you can purchase to support one of the organizations we have targeted this year. Hope's Closet: serving foster and adopted kids; the Spread the Warmth Project; the King's Daughters Apartments: loving on some of our Seniors; and the Resource Coordinators for the Franklin County elementary schools. How cool is that! Do you think we're doing this just to "spread some Christmas cheer"?
- We're starting to put together a Christmas Gift Box for every inmate in the Franklin County jail. We want to make sure they are remembered, and loved on during this Christmas season. Jon works with the jailers so we can fill their

Christmas boxes with stuff that we hope will make their day, and maybe touch them with God's grace.

- We always make a big deal helping our schools, especially Elkhorn Elementary. We've tried to form a special partnership with Elkhorn Elementary. We help collect school supplies at the beginning of the school year. We help their Resource Coordinators – in fact the Resource Coordinators all over the county – get the supplies they need to take care of some of the under-resourced kids. Do you think that's all we're about, just resourcing the under-resourced? Did you know that we have a Jesus centered after school program at Elkhorn every week. You looking for a place to make a difference? Talk to Lisa, our Children's Minister.
- A lot of our folks work at the Soup Kitchen, and the Women's Shelter. Sometimes it's just serving a meal. Sometimes it puts them in a place where they can share Jesus. How cool is that?

You see, I know that some of that stuff doesn't sound very "spiritual," even though caring for the physical needs of God's kids is a godly thing. But way more than that, sometimes they won't care what we say if they don't know we care. Sometimes loving on people by taking care of their physical needs gives us the right, and the opportunity, and the credibility to give them something way more precious than food – a nudge towards Jesus. Which is our biggest job!

That's what this RIP Medical Debt was all about, wasn't it? It wasn't just our opportunity to lift a financial burden off of some people who are hurting ... although that's cool enough! We hope, we pray, that some of these people we help will feel the love and the grace of God through us. Jesus said, "Let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father." (Matthew 5.16) We're trying to live that out, guys! And it's fun! It's rich! We hope, and we pray that there are people who will reconnect with God because of this gift. Are you willing to pray that? Are you willing to be in prayer for the next couple weeks for those who are going to get one of those amazing letters?

But others of the things we do as a church family are way more direct. Part of every dollar we give to the work of this church family goes to taking Jesus into our world. We don't just support local missions like the Bluegrass Christian Camp, where our kids are served, and the Christian Student Fellowship, where UK students are served. Some of our money goes to support missions and missionaries a long way from here.

- Right now Cameron is in Louisville, but he is working to take Jesus way beyond our state.
- Danielle is down in Louisiana, working with underprivileged kids. You're part of that!
- Chris and Marissa are in the Dominican Republic. You're part of that!
- Marky and Sydney Kessa, and Thomas Prophete are in Haiti. I believe we're been the lead supporter of Thomas for decades. Powerfully good work.

- We're the lead supporter, I think, for the Haitian Needy Children's Foundation, founded by our own Raymonde Jacques – Monde. We've sent numerous teams to Haiti to support those efforts.

And guys, periodically we send teams around the country, and even beyond our borders. Short term missions. And those who go almost inevitably come back impassioned, empowered, maybe even a little more fully human. Some of you guys need to get in on one of those teams.

But's not just about what we do here, together, as a church family. There are things you can do to take Jesus into all the world. Some of you ... this is dangerous ... but some of you might even feel God's nudge to go yourself. Maybe he's been preparing you to go, and he's nudging you. Will it cost you? Absolutely! Will it be worth it? Absolutely.

But there are things all of us can do, right here in Frankfort.

- You can adopt a kid. This is my kid in Brazil. Julie and I have been supporting kids through World Vision for over 40 years. Some of you guys have adopted kids through Compassion International. These great organizations take care of their physical needs, but they also nudge kids towards Jesus!
- You can pray ... for those taking Jesus beyond our borders. And you can support, personally, those taking Jesus beyond our borders. Without our support, they can't get it done. We're part of their team. You can encourage them. A letter; a gift. You can find out what they're needing and figure out a way to help, right from here.

Listen guys, there are way more needs than any of us can respond to. But you can respond to one, or a few. So, how about, do for one as you would if you could do for all. Did you hear that? Do for one as you would if you could do for all. Because if a bunch of us think like that, and act like that, we can be a powerhouse for the Kingdom.

PART 2

(Pic Onscreen) Three weeks ago I kicked off this little mini-series we're calling, "Rescuers," by showing you this picture. It's from one of my favorite Super-hero movies – Wonder Woman. A great flick!

Diana (or Wonder Woman) is an Amazon warrior, a demi-goddess – and she looks like one too! She's on a mission to save the world. Eventually she is surrounded by this band of misfits.

- Steve Trevor is a spy, a solid guy.

- Sameer is a liar, a thief, a con-man
- Charlie is a shell-shocked sharpshooter. He's seen too much, and he's broken.
- The Chief is a smuggler who trades with both sides – both the Germans and the allies.

And following her lead, drawing on her courage, this band of misfits storms the enemy strongholds, and they courageously fight house to house to free an occupied town, and they go way behind the enemy lines to turn the tide of the war. Despite their fears, and their inadequacies, they do the stuff of heroes. Because ... listen ... when you love and follow a hero, you tend to do heroic things.

And it struck me how much their story is our story. That's our picture! Of course theirs is a movie, a myth, a fantasy, but ours is real. Look around you: a band of misfits, following ... not a demi-goddess, we're following the Son of God. And, following his lead, and drawing on his strength, and his courage, we storm the enemy strongholds, and we fight from house to house, and we go way behind the enemy lines to rescue anyone we can. Despite our fears, and our inadequacies, we do the stuff of heroes. Because ... when you love and follow a hero, you tend to do heroic things.

Let me show you some our pictures. They are way cooler! These are the pictures of some of us who are not just ... not just loving on people by taking care of their physical needs, as cool as that is. These are the pictures of some of us who have done something to nudge someone towards a relationship with Christ that saves a soul forever. You see, I don't want you just to look at the faces of those being baptized ... though that's fun. I want you to look at the faces of the baptizers, the heroes. Do you see the smiles? Do you sense the joy? Can you sense the image of God dancing?

Jesus said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. (You will receive power, and you will receive power, and you will receive power ... when the Holy Spirit comes upon you) And all of you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem and Judea (starting at home), in Samaria (taking Jesus to those you don't like, and who don't like you), and (even) to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1.8) And they are getting it done! Guys, we are trying to erect a wall in front of the gates of hell!

Do you see the faces of those baptizers? Next year, will that be you? Can imagine how cool that would be? Can you imagine what it will feel like to have someone come up to you in heaven and hear them say, "Thank you for the part you played." Can you imagine what it will be like to let the image of God dance in you? Guys, we have work to do! Let's roll!