

SERMON
First Lutheran Church
Aitkin, Minnesota

Acts 8:26-39
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen
May 7, 2017

KIDS' MESSAGE

Kids, what would happen if your parents stopped preparing supper for you? What would happen if the grocery store people quit selling food? What if the farmer stopped growing vegetables? If we don't get good food to eat, we will die, right? What will happen if your friends stop playing with you? What if the ambulance didn't come when you were badly hurt? What if our house caught fire and the firemen didn't come to help? We'd be very sad and not very safe, right?

What if God stopped doing God's job? What is God's job?

- Creating people. Loving and caring for people. Feeding and clothing people. Rescuing and healing people. Helping people to do good things. . .

If God stopped doing God's job, we'd be very sad and not very safe right?

How does God do God's work? Who helps God?

- Your parents. The grocery store people. The farmers. Your friends. The ambulance people. The firemen. Who else? God can use anybody to do good for others.

God invites us to help God to do the good work necessary for everyone in this big, old world to have **safe and joyful lives**. When we come here for worship, we are showing up to love and thank God. But, we are also showing up to help each other. And God invites us to do the same when we are at home, at school or out in the world around us. **Love and thank God. Love and help other people.**

Today we are honoring **Sunday school teachers, Tiny Tots leaders** and **Quilters**. These are all people who are doing their best to love and thank God and to help God to love and take care of you and your family. So, thanks to them and thanks to God. And thank you too, for how you help God each day. Amen.

ADULT MESSAGE

A winter storm had moved in. Lots of snow and high winds. Last week, my wife, Jennifer, and I were watching a Netflix movie based on an actual event. The story took place in a small, coastal New England town. There was a Coast Guard station there. During the peak of the storm, a cargo ship sent a distress signal. It had broken in half and was sinking. The crew managed to ground it on a reef, but their chances of survival were pretty bleak. If they weren't rescued soon, they were sure to perish.

A small rescue boat was dispatched from the Coast Guard station but it faced impossible conditions. A sandbar near the entrance to the harbor created monster waves during storms. It was suicide to try and break through. The rescue crew should have stayed home. They believed they faced certain death.

But, they had a mission. Their job was to save lives. People were waiting for those stranded sailors back home. They wanted to live too. As the rescue crew worked to cross the sandbar, their radio and radar were smashed. Once out to sea, they managed to stumble upon the lost ship and discovered that there were thirty men on board. The rescue boat was built to hold twelve plus the crew of four. They decided "**all or none**" would make it back. Unbeknownst to the rescue crew, during the storm, the lights went out in the town. No radio, no radar, no lights on shore. How would they find their way back with their precious, overloaded cargo of human beings?

We are that rescue boat! Jesus was on that **sinking ship** – helping those sailors, not even knowing if rescue was on the way, to keep afloat as long as they possibly could. Jesus was on that **rescue boat** – guiding and empowering that crew against all odds. And Jesus was on the **shore** with the folks who had a place of help and refuge to offer. In that shipwreck story, there were life-threatening dangers on both ends and all the way in between. There weren't enough resources, but the folks used what they had to do the best they could. There was a tremendous need for **courage, confidence in themselves** and **trust in God**.

We are that rescue boat! And we are right in the middle of a huge and life-threatening storm. In our local papers, I read:

- **March 14, “Youth crisis outreach program comes to Brainerd.”** The article tells about Lutheran Social Services opening a **“Safe Place”** for teens to come and **receive help in times of crisis**. There are an estimated **4000 homeless youth** in Minnesota every night. Half are from rural areas. The LSS shelter for youth will open in Duluth this summer.
- **March 27, “Faith, forgiveness help Parents deal with loss.”** The article tells about a 21 year old daughter being killed by a drunk driver.
- **April 26, “Opioids: Son’s overdose motivates lawmaker.”** The article tells about MN State Representative, **Dave Baker**, who grew up in Aitkin, having to bury his 26 year old son here following a drug overdose.
- **April 27**, in a letter sent home by the **Aitkin School District #1 administration**, parents are warned about dangerous websites that their children may be frequenting which encourage entering into a 50 day **challenge which may lead young participants to commit suicide**.

Storm? **What storm?** These articles just scratch the surface of what our kids face. This weekend, we are honoring 21 graduating seniors who will soon be stepping out into the world on their own. Plus we have hundreds of other kids, infant to teens, who live in a sometimes scary, lonely, dangerous world. God is there with/for them. Do they know that, believe that? Will they remember that?

Anne Lamott, in her book, **“Grace (Eventually) Thoughts on Faith,”** tells about teaching a Sunday school class with five rambunctious five and six year old boys. Anne struggles to **keep their attention** and to **prevent anyone from getting hurt**. She shares the biblical story and finally the class winds down with the pasting project. She concludes, **“How much of the lesson did the children take in that day? I can’t answer that, and besides, I wasn’t in charge. But it all comes to dropping a few seeds on the ground. If the soil is ready, the seeds will grow, and if not, you could have the Archangel Michael buzzing around the room in a**

thong and the kids still won't get it. At any rate, we all ended up on the floor with our butts in the air, like ducks feeding in the shallows of a marsh.

We have 21 of our seniors. How much have they learned from their **Tiny Tots, Sunday School** and **Vacation Bible School** teachers? How much have they absorbed from their **Confirmation small group leaders** and **one-on-one mentors**? What have they learned about loving and trusting God from their **parents**? **Anne Lamott** says, **"I can't answer that, and besides, I wasn't in charge."** Through years of her own personal life challenges and defeats, years of struggling with the faith herself, Anne Lamott has learned that we better not count upon **what we've been able to do**. We will do much better to count upon **what God has been able to do** in our lives, through us, or even, in spite of us. **God is the faithful one.**

Have our kids learned enough to **love and trust God**? Have they learned enough to **seek God's guidance** in the face of big, life decisions – career, marriage, family? Have they learned enough to **ask for God's help** when the bottom is falling out? Have they learned enough to **claim God's love and forgiveness** when they have hurt themselves or others?

Phillip did some teaching. He's the fellow in our text for today. Phillip had been chosen to serve as a "**deacon**" with the responsibility of making sure that the Greek widows in the early Christian church were treated fairly when food was distributed. However, in our text, Phillip is drawn by God to go beyond the narrow boundaries of his **food mission**. Phillip is called to go on a **rescue mission**.

Then there is the **unnamed Ethiopian eunuch**. He was a castrated man, probably started out as a slave, who had risen to being a top official in the Ethiopian queen's court. He was wealthy and powerful. He was educated. In our text, he has a chariot, a driver and is reading what would have been an extremely costly scroll from the ancient prophet Isaiah. This Ethiopian eunuch had come a long way over dangerous roads to worship the God of the Jews in Israel. He wanted to draw closer to this God. He was taking some risks.

Our story takes place in the **middle of nowhere**. God quite often seems to show up in nowhere places. Our scene takes place in the “**wilderness**.” Jews considered the wilderness to be dangerous, lonely, and arid, a place where demons dwelt and a place where God was not likely to be found. **Wrong**.

Phillip is feeding widows when an angel shows up and instructs him to go on the road. Phillip responds without questioning. And like our rescue boat lost in a storm, Phillip **somehow manages to find** our Ethiopian friend on this wilderness road. The Ethiopian is riding along in his chariot when Phillip runs up beside him.

The Ethiopian is trying to grow closer to this God he has discovered amongst the Jews. Phillip has “**Good News**” that God is also trying to move closer to the Ethiopian. So here comes a **total stranger** running beside a fancy chariot. **Crazy or God’s work?** And here is **another stranger**, wealthy, powerful and foreign who accepts Phillip’s approach and invites him to hop into his chariot and help him to understand what Isaiah is teaching about God. **Crazy or God’s work?** Phillip explains how God has come to live, die and rise again to save all people through Jesus Christ. The Ethiopian finally understands who God is and how much God loves him. Then, upon spotting some water along the road, the man asks, “**What is to prevent me from being baptized?**” Water on a desert road? **Crazy or God’s work?** You heard the story. The man is baptized. The Holy Spirit comes. Phillip disappears and the eunuch heads for home “**rejoicing**.” That’s what God wants for each and for all of us – to be able to live a **life filled with rejoicing** despite the challenges and storms that may surround us.

Have you ever experienced for yourself, in your heart and life, **how much God loves and cares for you?** Have you experienced the **peace and joy that God wants you to have?** Could you **share that gift** with someone else? Or maybe, **could you use the assurance of God’s total love and care** for you right now? I **wonder if God has brought someone here today** who might share that affirmation with you?

How often does this happen – right place at the right time? Have you ever run into someone at the gas pumps, grocery store, football game, work site – someone who literally **lifts you up and carries you** with what they say and do? Have you yourself sometimes been at the right time and place to **lift and carry someone else**, even just for a few minutes? Have you had a **marvelous experience** in an out-of-the-way and dangerous place? God is all over that. Have you had a **bad experience** in an out-of-the-way place, or in the heart of the city, or within your own home? God is all over that too. **Help that comes in another person-** God. **Resources that somehow stretch to meet the need** – God. **Strength, courage and hope** that hang on long enough for you to experience **rescue, deliverance and a new start** – God is all over that too.

God is not twiddling thumbs in heaven as we journey through our lives alone. No, God is moving, constantly moving, to **bring about good in all things** for us. And to give each and every person – **deep, rich and abundant life**. Tiny Tots teachers, Sunday school teachers, Quilters, Confirmation leaders and Mentors, Coffee House leaders and Vacation Bible School teachers – how many of you have, at one time or another, prayed for these kids, taught them, shared words of faith, hope and love with them, cheered them on to victory, comforted them in defeat, fed them? (**Stand up**. . .)

Seniors, parents, sisters and brothers of Jesus, **we are the rescue boat** and **Jesus is with us** when we **reach out to help**. And Jesus is with us when we **need help**. **Jesus is our hope, our help, our life** and **our joy**. Remember that and live well, now and forever. Thanks be to God. Amen.