

**The Courage of a Fire Fighter's Life**  
**Matthew 16:11-22**  
**September 3, 2023**  
**Rev. Laurie Crelly, East Church**  
**Grand Rapids MI**

Friday was my brother John's birthday. He is just two years older than me, and I am very proud of him. Besides being a very good father of four wonderful children, grandfather to three beautiful grandchildren and married 37 years to his High School sweetheart, he is a fire fighter like our father was. In fact, when our father was sick with congestive heart failure my brother John talked to him about joining the fire department as soon as he turned 18. He had a few months to think about it and my dad's advice to him was – "Don't join the department for me, that is not enough. Join it because you are willing to put it all on the line. It is a dangerous career, and it could kill you."

My dad spoke from thirty years of experience and had seen his share of scary, dangerous situations where people died or were seriously injured on duty.

My dad had to resign from the department when he got sick at age 49. He was the Assistant Fire Chief of Golden Valley Fire Department, a first ring suburb of Minneapolis. He died less than two years later. By that summer, as John turned eighteen, he signed up and started training to be a fire fighter and paramedic just like his father. He also recruited about ten other classmates and friends that joined the force because of John's dedication.

Today, John is the Fire Chief at Golden Valley, overseeing an all-volunteer force and three fire stations. We are fortunate that John is living with his own heart disease with the help of a pacemaker, and we hope that he may finally retire this year. He no longer needs to run into buildings with full gear on, but the stress of the job is still harsh. His passion and devotion to saving lives is a legacy of our family and a testament to his own deep spiritual faith to love others as Christ first loved us.

Now as a fire fighter you put your life on the line every time you answer the call. You take risks to rescue people from very dangerous and unpredictable situations that you

take calculated risks to contain, especially when lives are at risk, including your own. You also bear the heart ache at every life lost.

To be a fire fighter is more than a job, it is a lifestyle, a calling that involves your whole family. When the tones come over the radio everyone stops and listen to dispatcher's voice, watching to see if this is his call. The department is family because you have a common passion and a common bond of devotion to the call. You share in the struggle and the joy of saving lives and making the world a safer place. Like our scripture today – my brother's life has been filled with that kind of devotion. He too denies himself time and again in the hopes of doing what it takes to save another life. When others are running from danger, fire fighters run towards it to save others.

As you may guess, I find many parallels between aspects of the Christian call to self-sacrifice as we read in today's readings and the life of a rescuer and medical professionals like a fire fighter/paramedic. Both are called to love and care for all people without bias. Jesus was right when he described himself as a healer or doctor. Those in rescue and medical professionals are also called to seek and to save all people. There is no distinction in their care of a good or bad person, foreigner or citizen, worthy or unworthy person. The pledge of a healer is found in the Hippocratic oath. "The Physician/healer pledges to prescribe only beneficial treatments, according to their abilities and judgment; to refrain from causing harm or hurt; and to live an exemplary personal and professional life."

Very similar principles of life and faith we find in our Romans text this morning.

Like a fire fighter, our Christian calling is a calling to a way of life. When we look at the list in Romans 12, we see a repeating emphasis of putting others first with a spirit of love and humility. Some of us may know it as a principled life or a virtuous life.

Principles that shape our daily actions to live a life of love. Other principles we often turn to may be the ten commandments, or the Love chapter found in 1 Corinthians 13 or the gifts and fruits of the spirit found in Corinthians and Galatians, or the greatest

commandment and the golden rule. All of these are things we should keep in the forefront of our daily living, guiding principles to keep us faithful to the calling of Christ.

That leads me into my second point. Like a good fire fighter, we need to be prepared and trained for the call. Training in the spiritual world is a regular personal life of prayer, confession, meditation and reading of scripture so our hearts are attuned to God's kingdom ways. Jesus points this out to Peter in his rebuke when he says, "you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." It is a lifelong effort to stay ready for the call to self sacrifice. It is human nature to self-preservation and survival. To put others first in the face of such danger is discipline we regularly work at. Paul says it well in the beginning of Romans chapter 12 verses 1-2 "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, on the basis of God's mercy, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable act of worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

A third aspect of the life of self-sacrificing discipleship is found in the community. By training and working together we work to strengthen our bonds and ability to rely on one another. That requires ongoing vulnerability and accountability. The disciples spent three years training and studying under Jesus. When the day of Pentecost came, they were ready to carry on the mission of Christ on their own. Together they shook the world with the Good News that love conquers all. They had learned to take up their cross daily in service to love the world even to the point of death. Each one of us are touched by the flame of the Holy Spirit. My cross may not be your cross, but together we will carry the crosses of the world to advance the kingdom of God here on earth. As Christians of today, we are called to live a principled life that gives us courage to risk our lives in the name of Christ, a disciplined life that keeps us ready to respond to

the cry for justice and a life of community devoted to one another in love. Let us continue to take up our cross daily and follow in the footsteps of Christ wherever it may lead us.

Just as a fire fighter puts on their gear before leaving for the call may we also put on the gear that God gives us as described in Ephesians 6:11-13

“Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, for our struggle is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

As Fire Fighters put on their gear, many pray, reminding themselves what they are battling and who they are seeking to save. May this prayer inspire our own daily prayer as we too put on the full armor of God and take up our cross.

*When I am called to duty, God wherever flames may rage, give me strength to save a life, whatever be its age. Help me to embrace a little child before it's too late, or save an older person from the horror of that fate. Enable me to be alert, to hear the weakest shout, and quickly and efficiently to put the fire out.*