

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Answering the Call”**

**Psalm 34:1 – 8
Mark 10:46 – 52**

Emergency Service Recognition

October 25, 2015

As some of you know, before I went into pastoral ministry in churches, I served for a year as a chaplain... at a hospital in Abington, Pennsylvania. It was challenging, but rewarding, work... and it definitely helped me become more comfortable in hospitals, where, of course, I spend a lot of my time as a pastor. And the most challenging thing about the job, was when it was my turn to be “on call” for the night. At our hospital there was a chaplain on duty twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week; and there were four of us chaplains in the Pastoral Care department. So, every week each of us would be “on call” overnight, at least once and usually twice.

And when it was my turn to be on call, the previous on call chaplain would hand off the beeper at the end of the day... and after my three pastoral care colleagues went home at five o’clock, I’d, eat dinner, make rounds, go to bed in the cramped “on call room,” and wait for the beeper to go off. (Note: this was back in the days before cell phones, and iPads, and other more technologically advanced forms of communication; so, if somebody needed me, they had to beep for me.)

And this is where the really challenging part came in. Because after a while that beeper started to feel like a ticking time bomb; you never knew when it was going to go off... and when it *did* go off, you never knew where you were going to get called to, or what kind of situation you’d find when you got there.

I mean, sometimes I got called to such relatively calm and benign situations as a restless patient who just needed someone to sit and talk with him; or an ICU nurse who was having a bad day and needed a shoulder to cry on; or a local priest who wanted to give me an update on one of his parishioners who’d just been admitted as a patient. Those calls were important, but they were fairly *easy* to deal with. There was little in the way of stress, anxiety, or fear involved with them.

But then sometimes I got called into an avalanche of human anguish, and misery, and grief. Like the time I was awakened from a dead sleep to come to the ER and sit with the family of a local doctor who’d been shot in his bedroom by an intruder. Or the three a.m. call to stand with a family as they identified one of their own as the victim of a horrible car crash. Or the countless “code blue” calls, indicating that someone was in cardiac arrest and might not make it.

These calls were also important, obviously, and very *difficult* to deal with... while they were happening, and later, as I struggled with my own feelings and reactions to it all. These were gut-wrenching, heartbreaking, nerve-racking, calls; calls that left me wondering why on earth I’d chosen that particular line of work. And, as I said, when the beeper went off, you didn’t know what kind of situation you were being called to... until you got there. Maybe it was something simple; maybe it was something awful. But, either way, when that beeper *did* go off, as a chaplain, you

always answered the call... no matter what. Ignoring the beeper and not answering, was not an option. And we always did go. And no matter what we found on the other end of that beeping summons... we always did the best we could.

Of course, you don't have to be a hospital chaplain to do this sort of thing... many of us have jobs that require us to answer calls of one kind or another. And, certainly, family life itself can sometimes feel like a nonstop succession of calls to which we must respond... if we're to keep our homes, and our careers, and our children in one piece. And right at the top of the call-answering food-chain stand our firefighters and emergency service personnel... who, as we know, are out there answering the call all day, every day, no matter the time... no matter the date... no matter the weather... no matter *what*.

And it's a rare occasion when more than fifteen or twenty minutes pass, without the sound of a firetruck or ambulance siren announcing to the village that yet another call has been answered... and that yet another life has been touched by the ministry of these brothers and sisters who look after our wellbeing.

Now, of course, as with hospital chaplains, not every call that's answered by firefighters and other emergency responders is a life-threatening disaster. For example, last month, over at the manse, a faulty sensor in the basement sent the message to our security system that our house was filling up with natural gas or carbon monoxide... at three o'clock in the morning. This in turn set off the smoke alarm, which is so loud that the heart attack you have when you hear it, is guaranteed to kill you even if the houseful of deadly gas doesn't.

While I was trying in vain to figure out how to turn off the alarm, the security company was calling the fire department, the police department, homeland security, and the FBI... all of whom rushed to our house in the middle of the night, to make sure that we hadn't been suffocated in our beds. Well, okay, not homeland security and the FBI... but the police and the fire department were there; and boy, did I ever feel like an idiot when, after covering every square inch of the house and basement with a handheld gas detector, the firemen announced that there wasn't a trace of gas anywhere in the place... and that it must, after all, be a faulty sensor. It turned out to be a false alarm... but those guys answered the call anyway; in the middle of the stinkin' night. And I was really glad that they did, because next time the danger might be real.

And who could forget the time, a couple of summers ago, when the fire department was again called to the manse... after my wife tried to barbecue 30 chicken breasts... all at once. The flames were contained within the barbecue... so no real harm was done. Although the chicken breasts were incinerated, and the barbecue was wrecked. But, for the fire department, it was a fairly easy call... and something that we can all look back on and laugh about today.

But, as we all know, not every call that's answered is safe, or easy, or a false alarm. Sometimes people are injured; sometimes the whole house is on fire; sometimes the danger is real to the people who are there to help; and sometimes it's a life-or-death situation. And that's when "answering the call" takes on a whole new meaning.

And the point is that, again like a hospital chaplain, when the bell goes off, our emergency responders don't say, "*Hey, let's wait and see if it's serious or not!*" They don't say, "*We're only going if it's safe and easy.*" They don't say, "*Let somebody else do it this time! Don't bug me!*" They don't say, "*It's the middle of the bloody night! Call me back after nine a.m.!*" They don't

say anything... they just plain *go*. No matter what. They answer the call; every call... every time. And every one of us here this morning is grateful that they do.

And it's in this way, I think, that the ministry of our emergency responders resembles the ministry of Jesus... who also spent most of His adult life answering assorted calls. Like our firefighters and others, sometimes the calls that Jesus answered were fairly routine. Like when people would call on Him to say a prayer, or tell a parable, or explain in greater detail some point of His teaching.

But sometimes the calls were more ambitious, more challenging, more dangerous; such as when Jesus' mother, Mary, called on Him to do something about the dwindling wine supply at the marriage feast in Cana, in the Gospel of John... a request that resulted in Jesus' miraculously turning water into wine. Or when He was called on to answer some diabolical trick question from the scribes and Pharisees, who were always trying to trip Him up and trap Him in His words. Or when He was called on to break through cultural and religious barriers, by reaching out to lepers, and tax-collectors, and other community "sinners."

Or, as we saw in our lesson this morning from Mark's gospel, when He was called on to heal some sick person. When blind Bartimaeus called out, "*Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!*" he discovered what every other person who ever called to Jesus for help also discovered; he discovered that, like a good Southampton emergency responder, Jesus always answered the call.

Even if it was out of His way; even if it was inconvenient; even if He'd rather have been doing something else. When Jesus got the call, Jesus answered. And when Jesus answered, lives were changed... forever. That was certainly the case for Bartimaeus, who once was blind... but who now could see. And it's also the case for each and every one of us... when we find ourselves in need of hope, or peace, or forgiveness, or wisdom for living life in our frequently difficult world.

When *we* make the call to Jesus, He will never just keep on walking... with more important things to do. No, He will hear us, and He will answer us... and He will touch our hearts with His grace. And, like good old Bartimaeus, *our* lives will never be the same again!

As we think about the firefighters and other emergency service personnel of our community, I hope that we can keep in mind this image, of Jesus answering the call of blind Bartimaeus. Not that our emergency responders can work miracles or walk on water; just that, they're there for us when we need them. They're there for us, even when we forget how much we need them. They're there for us at all hours of the night and day... just when we're at our most fearful and vulnerable.

And that's why we take the time, and make the effort, to have a day like today... on which we say "thank you" to the men and women whose vigilance and dedication help to keep us safe. That's why we take the time to give thanks to our Heavenly Father, for raising up people who, after the example of Jesus, aren't afraid to go the extra mile in service of those in need. That's why we celebrate the glorious message of the gospel, which teaches us that one of the most important things that we can do for one another... is to care for one another. And to care, especially, when our lives have been turned upside down.

That's what Jesus has done for us. That's what our firefighters and emergency workers do for us. That's what we can all strive to do, for each other; to the very best of our ability. May that be our quest, in the days and weeks ahead. For to such have we been called; in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.