

Stormy Waters, Dry Deserts,

Shaky Ground

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Psalm 107:1-9

One of the unique things about being Christian is that our teacher, Jesus of Nazareth, was primarily a storyteller. Certainly he had other forms of teaching – sermons, lectures, maxims and proverbs – but what we most know Jesus for are his parables. His stories.

Parables, in particular, are stories intended to surprise us, wake us up. Parables are stories that you don't know are about you until you get to the end. Parables are jokes, but you don't know until the punch line that the joke is on you. Parables are stories that quicken your conscience. Last week I read the parable of the Good Samaritan – a story prompted by a lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?" and instead of presenting a legal brief on the subject, Jesus just tells a story. A story that the lawyer does not realize is about him until the end – meaning that it's a story that lures him in and makes him wrestle with himself. Parables provoke inside of us a response, if only for us to ask ourselves, what does it mean for me? What does it mean for me to be a neighbor? What does it mean for me to love my neighbor? It's one thing to say, "Love your neighbor." It's another thing to tell a story about it. I'm guessing if Jesus were asked today about the issue of immigration, he might just tell us a story like the Good Samaritan.

So all of this is to say that many moons ago while in seminary and considering the parish ministry I read a book by Howard Clinebell on pastoral counseling. And Clinebell begins the book by wondering about the mission of the church and he shares a parable – a parable originally composed by Richard Wheatcroft. The story goes this way:

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur there was once a crude little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought

for themselves went out day and night tirelessly searching for the lost. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station, so that it became famous. Some of those who were saved, and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give of their time and money and effort for the support of its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building. Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully and furnished it exquisitely, because they used it as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on the lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in this club's decoration, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club initiations were held. About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick, and some of them had black skin and some had yellow skin. The beautiful new club was in chaos. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where victims of shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a lifesaving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. They did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that occurred in the old. It evolved into

a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that seacoast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

It is this story that comes to mind when I read the 107th Psalm. Psalm 107 is a song about the gathered people of God. As Christians when we read this we

“Whenever I understand that the world is not a safe place...for me and for you...whenever I can see through my wounds - your wounds - then maybe I become kind.”

think of the church. “Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, those he redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.” We have, according to the Psalmist, been gathered in by God from trouble. We are the community that has been rescued from trouble. We are the shipwrecked victims who have been pulled from the sea. We are the dripping wet and the shivering, grateful for a hot shower and a clean set of clothes. The psalmist, to make his point, employs a host of metaphors. We were once a lost people wandering in the desert. Our mouths and souls parched, desperate for a drink of living water. We were once the imprisoned. Bound by whatever forces – within and without – locked up and helpless to find release. We were once the infirmed and weak. Riddled either by the illnesses of our own devising or by the contagion of the world. We once were the wrecked and drowning – tossed to and fro by the sea. In other words, life ain't easy. It's a dangerous world out there and sometimes it's a dangerous world in here. Sometimes the ship sails on placid seas and sometimes she's tossed to and fro and sometimes she breaks up. Sometimes the hike is through shady forests with well marked paths – and sometimes it's

through barren sands without a compass. But at the end of the day we – we who count ourselves as the children of God – we are the rescued ones. We are the ones pulled from the stormy sea. We are the ones saved from the hot sands. We are the ones unlocked from the prison cell. We are the ones healed from the wasting illness. Let's not forget this, says the Psalmist. We are gathered here not by virtue of our virtue. We

are gathered here not by the benefit of our wit and wisdom. We are gathered here not by merits of our intellect. We are gathered here because we got pulled from sea, lifted from the desert. This is our story. A story of rescue and grace and redemption and release and new beginnings. Pope Francis calls the church - the field hospital for the wounded - and that means you and me.

You know it's interesting how much of our lives we spend on making sure everybody realizes that we have our act together. That somehow either we have managed to avoid the stormy waters and desert sands – or that somehow we were smart enough and strong enough to save ourselves. Good thing I got the brains or I got good job or I got picked for the right school. We are tempted to tout our resume.

Now there is no one that believes more in achievement than me – I grew up with that good ol' Protestant work ethic – there's nothing in this world that a little hard work can't cure. But in the end we are not the gathering of the hard workers. We are not the gathering of the smart people. We are not the gathering of the lucky dogs. We are the community of people who know that life is difficult – and not everybody gets dealt the same hand – and sometimes

the black clouds hit the horizon before you know it and sometimes you get lost. And sometimes life really hurts. And sometimes things are beyond your control. And sometimes you need help. And sometimes you need grace. Sometimes you need rescue. Sometimes you need to be loved. And it's OK to admit that you don't have your act together.

Xavier Le Pichon, the French geophysicist, is acknowledged to be the pioneer of the geological study of plate tectonics. Plate tectonics is the theory that the continents and the earth's crust are always shifting. That while centuries of scientists assumed that the geological formation of the earth's continents were static and always had been – Le Pichon discovered that actually the earth is always shifting and that the continents are always moving. The ground is, whether we know it or not, always shifting under our feet. We feel it in an earthquake to be sure, but by millimeters it is happening even now. The earth is always moving under our feet. Now Le Pichon, a deeply spiritual man and practicing Catholic, wonders if there isn't more to it than that. That maybe the truth is all of life is shifting. The tectonic plates of our soul of our families of our 401K of our health of our politics – all of it is shifting. And that all life is fragile in the face of changing forces. And that the deepest truth we can discover about ourselves is our vulnerability, our need for help, our need for rescue.

Dorothy Day, the great 20th century Christian social pioneer who dedicated her life on behalf of the Church to serve the poor would often speak of the time when she was a young girl – 8 years old – living in San Francisco and one night – April 18, 1906 - as she laid sleeping, under her the earth shook, around her the house swayed. It was the great San Francisco earthquake. “The earthquake started with a deep rumbling,” she later wrote in her autobiography, “and the convulsions of the earth started afterward, so that the earth became a sea which rocked our house in a most tumultuous manner ... In my big brass bed, I rolled back and forth on a polished floor.” Dorothy and her family became refugees crossing the bay to Oakland and making camp in a nearby park. And she saw something the memory of which never left her. “While the crisis lasted, people loved each other. It was as though they were united in Christian solidarity.

It makes one think of how people could, if they would, care for each other in times of stress, unjudgingly in pity and love.” Later Dorothy Day wrote, “Let's build a society where it's easier for people to be good to each other.”

And I'm guessing what the Psalmist had in mind, and what Jesus had in mind, is that when the people of God are gathered and see themselves as the rescued ones – the ones delivered from the storms and the sands and the quakes – then maybe it becomes for us a little easier to unjudgingly care for someone else. We are the community of the rescued and the rescuing. When you've been brought in on the lifeboat, it's easier to go back out on the lifeboat. No one thinks to ask a drowning man whether he deserves to be saved.

You know the apostle Paul was never accused of being very touchy-feely. If there was ever an achievement kind of guy – he was it. Driven. Driven. Driven. And his drive was about the good news. That we are saved by grace. Saved by grace. Rescued from the stormy sea. And in one of his letters there is this moment when the apostle lets down his guard and talks about his pain. His wound. His thorn in the flesh. Three times he begs the good Lord to take this mysterious thorn from him. But to no avail. Instead the good Lord says to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” And later the apostle writes, “So whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”

Whenever I am weak, then I am strong. Whenever I remember that stormy sea from whence I came. That unmerited lifeboat that paddled to my side. That gathering of people that welcomed my dripping body. That table from which I was fed. That font from which I was cleansed. Whenever I remember the lost parts of me from which I still need rescue – Amazing then what room my heart gives for those who are barely still treading water. When I am weak, then I am strong.

So maybe what the world most needs is just a little more weakness. Just a few more people in touch with their own rescue so as to want to rescue someone else. Unjudgingly. No questions asked. Unconditional. One beggar telling another beggar where she found bread. Wounded healers – Henri Nouwen calls us. For it is in our weakness where we find what? It is

in our weakness where we find our kindness, right? Whenever I understand that the world is not a safe place...for me and for you...whenever I can see through my wounds - your wounds - then maybe I become kind.

Before you know kindness, writes the poet Naomi Shihab Nye, as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth. Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore, only kindness that ties your shoes and sends you out into the day to gaze at bread, only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say It is I you have been looking for, and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.

Whenever I am weak, says the apostle, I am strong. Whenever I am wounded, says the priest, then I am healer. Whenever I find sorrow, says the poet, then I find kindness.

Rescued and now rescuer.

Some kind of punch line.



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Dr. Stephen D. McConnell
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Church of the Palms

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3224 Bee Ridge Rd, Sarasota FL 34239 • (941) 924-1323