

WHEN YOU NEED A LIFT

Exodus 17:8-15

June 25, 2009

(The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost)

Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter, and not just do what is most convenient for us. Strength is for service, not status. Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, "How can I help?"

That's what it says right there in the bible! Step in. Lend a hand. There are other people who need your help. So help them! says Paul. And that's what I did. I stepped in. I stepped right *into* is what I did. But I was trying to help. Honest I was. Because my father-in-law needed all the help he could get. Believe me. He was a busy man. Peddling pumpkins and cushaws and half-runner beans down at the farmer's market. And people would find him there. And they'd come -- not just for sweet corn and peppers and home-grown tomatoes. They'd come for advice. They'd come seeking wise counsel from a man who knew the times and the seasons. A man who could look at the moon and the stars and the swelling of his index finger, and tell you whether or not to pack an umbrella.

In fact, he said one of the local TV weather-persons stopped by the market one morning, bought a few tomatoes and a couple of cucumbers and said, "Mr. Taylor, I've always heard that when it's going to rain, the cows will all lie down under the trees in the pasture." And my father-in-law said, "Well, that's right," he said. "I would imagine they would." And the weatherman, who was trying to find some way to redeem himself after a month or so of bad predictions, said, "Well, Mr. Taylor, tell me. What does it mean when half the heard is lying down and half are

standing up?” And my father-in-law looked at him and said, “It means half of them are wrong.”

He was proud of this, I think. Told us all about it. And Ann’s sisters said, “Shame on you, Daddy.” But he told them he was just trying to do what the bible says. “He was a stranger,” he said, “and I took him in.” ✕ It’s the Christian thing to do, of course. Because it was plain to see that that man needed help. And he was there for him. Really. Just as Paul said we *should* be.

Those of us who are strong and able (and wise like my father-in-law) **in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter, and not just do what is most convenient for us. Strength is for service,** (says Paul) **not status. Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, "How can I help?"**

And he knew all about that, I think. Ann’s father needed all the help he could get. So I decided to offer it to him. (This was before we were married, mind you. And I wanted to make a good impression on him.) And he accepted. He did. He said, “Well, we could use some help putting up hay.” And I thought, “How hard could *that* be?” You pick up the hay and put on a truck.... “I’ll be there,” I said. “When do we start?” He said, “Be at the hayfield first thing in the morning.”

Now, I didn’t grow up on a farm like some people, mind you. Ann says I’m a “townie.” *Citified* she says. Because I grew up in Wayne. And the truth is I had never been in a hayfield before. So I wore a short sleeve shirt because it was hot. And by the end of the day my arms were red and swollen and scratched all to pieces. And I never forgot it. Didn’t wear a short-sleeve shirt for years after that. And I probably wouldn’t wear them now if Ann didn’t insist. But I was there bright and early and ready to work.

And the truck was already stacked pretty high with bales of hay. Sherri, Ann's sister was driving the truck. And Ann and her dad were picking up hay bales. And they are not *tall* people, mind you. So they would kind of lift a bale up from the ground and kind of bounce it on one knee, and then swing it up over their head and scoot on to the stack. And I remember thinking, "This is it! This is my chance to impress Ann's father and show him that I'm not a wimp!"

So I picked up a bale of hay and lifted it up with one hand underneath and the other behind it. And I just kind of shot the thing like a big basketball. And it was beautiful. Really. Poetry in motion. That bale of hay made a perfect arch, up over the truck, over the hay -- cleared it by a good three feet, I'm sure. And then it hit the ground on the other side of the truck and just broke apart. But he was merciful, mind you. He didn't laugh. He just nodded his head, looked at Ann and said, "**He's got a good arm, but you might want to show him where the truck is.**"

[Ann has two sisters, you know. She's the youngest. And when the other two decided to get married, their husbands-to-be (or *hoped* to be) had to sit down with Mr. Taylor and ask for their hand in marriage and *explain* to him just how they planned to take care of his daughters.... Then it was my turn. I gave her the ring on Christmas Eve. And when he came home from the Christmas Eve service, she showed him the ring. And he looked at it... and he looked at me ... and he had to go lie down, I guess. Went straight to bed. Didn't say a word. He passed away almost four years ago, and he never mentioned it.

I'd like to think he was pleased beyond words with the thought that I'd be his son-in-law... and that my work in the hayfield that day had truly rendered him speechless. But I never had the nerve to ask. I just didn't want him to say, "**Son .. you're half right about that.**"

[Paul said, **Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter, and not just do what is most convenient for us. Strength is for service, not status. Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, "How can I help?"**]

Years ago, there were two young boys, *both named Charlie*, in the same fifth-grade class. But they were *nothing alike*. One was “up” on schoolwork and friends and good manners. But the other was down, *way down ... and distracted and angry and not very popular*, really. He was faltering and according to the teacher would probably fail. Because he hardly ever studied and he rarely paid attention.

Well, at a PTA meeting, one night, a very polite, well-dressed woman walked up to the fifth-grade teacher, and she introduced herself. “I’m *Charlie’s mother*,” she said. And... there was no need to ask. She *knew right away* that this was the “good” Charlie’s mother, the model student’s mom. And she said, **“Oh, he’s one of my favorite students. Such a good boy,”** she said. And she just beamed with pride and said, **“He’s such a joy to have in class.”**

The next morning, just before the bell rang, Charlie came running into the room -- the *other Charlie, the failing Charlie*. And he ran right up to the teacher. She thought he was going to knock her right off her feet. And he threw his arms round her ... And he was sobbing. He was all choked up, mind you. He couldn’t even speak. And she thought what on earth has happened? What’s wrong with this child? And finally he managed to speak through the tears, “Thank you teacher.” Thank you for *what?* she thought. He said, **“Thank you for telling my mom that you think I’m a good boy ... and that I’m one of your favorites.”**

She was shocked. She realized now what had happened. But she didn’t say anything. She let the boy talk. And Charlie said, **“I know I**

haven't been very good -- but I WILL be, I promise." And she patted his head. And she turned away to hide her tears. She never said a word about the mix-up that night or how she thought his mom was the other Charlie's mom. There was no need. For you see, something wonderful happened. Charlie changed. Transformed. He started *trying his best* at everything he did. And he paid attention and learned to make friends. And he became one of her favorite students. Really. He did. And he was a joy, she said, to have in her class. **L**

That's what this story from Exodus is about, I think. It's about someone who was faltering, someone who was failing, someone who was down -- *defeated and weary*. And it's about someone stepping in and lending a hand, so that hearts and hopes and spirits were lifted... and what a difference that can make in how things turn out.

Moses the shepherd was helping out on his father-in-law's farm, tending the sheep and doing what shepherd's do. And he saw a burning bush on the mountain. And God said, "Go, tell Pharaoh to let my people go." And he did. There were frogs and flies and big ugly grasshoppers and a whole river of blood before he *did* it, mind you. But Pharaoh finally said, "Go." And Moses led the Hebrew people through the Red Sea and into the desert with the *promise* that God would be with them. And they were "up" -- their hopes were high and their spirits were "up."

But, as luck would have it, they ran out of food and the water went bad. And to make matters worse an *army* attacked them at a place called Rephidim. **God will be with you**, said Moses. **You can count on it**, he said ... But where was he now? An **army** was coming at them with swords and spears and helmets and shields. And what could they *do*? They couldn't *fight* them! They were **bricklayers** not soldiers. They'd never been trained to fight. And they were too tired to run. So **this is it**, they thought. **We're all going to die!**

But Moses knew better. **God's with us**, he said. And he told Joshua to gather an army. **Go find some men who will stand up and fight. And tomorrow I'll stand on the hill with God's staff in my hand!**

Can you imagine?! You're going to do *what?* says Joshua. "I'm going to stand over there," says Moses, "on top of that hill and hold up this stick." (Soldiers still talk about leaders on the hill who hold sticks in their hand, you know. Only these days they call those sticks *pencils*.) But that's what he said. ***I'm going to stand up here and hold this stick.***

But it wasn't just *any* stick, mind you, it was **God's stick**, the staff of the Lord -- the one Moses held in his hands when God parted the sea and gave them water to drink from a rock in the desert. *That* was the stick he would lift up before them. So they'd see and remember what God had *already* done ... and know in their *hearts* that he was still *with* them.

But *without* that reminder they would forget. They'd see only their enemies -- only those who were trying to destroy them (and *not* the Lord). And the battle would be lost. Because then they'd be depending on their *own* strength, their *own* wisdom, their *own* power and skill and *not* on the Lord's.

So the next morning, Joshua gathered his men. And he led them in battle. And Moses stood on the hill with God's staff in his hands. And they could see it. They could. The staff of the Lord. And they remembered God's strength. And they remembered God's power. And they knew in their hearts that **God was with them**. And as long as they did -- they were able to stand up against the ones who were trying to destroy them. For Amalek's soldiers were no match for the Lord.

But Moses was tired. His shoulders were aching. And his hands were dropping lower and lower. And when they did, the tables were turned and the enemies raged against the Hebrew people. Moses tried to keep

the staff held high. But it was so heavy and his arms were so tired that he just couldn't do it. And it looked as if the Hebrew children, the people of Israel, would be destroyed.

But just as Moses was beginning to falter, Aaron and Hur came to the top of the hill. And when they saw Moses struggling to lift up the staff, they found a rock. And they sat Moses up on the rock. And they stood on the ground below him and held up his arms, one on one side and one on the other. And with Aaron and Hur there to support him, Moses took the staff of God in his hands and he held it up until sunset that evening. And the people remembered that they weren't alone -- that God was there with them. And **remembering** that **God** was their rock and their strength gave them the courage and the strength that they needed to withstand **all** that would destroy them ... and to be the people God was calling them to be.

Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter, and not just do what is most convenient for us.

That's what Paul said. Because he knew that we *all* get a little weary at times. And our spirits sag. And our hearts grow heavy. And when they do it gets harder and harder to stand up against the things that threaten us. It gets harder and harder to hold on to your *faith* and be the person God calls you to be.

John Wesley taught us that being a Christian just isn't something we can do on our own -- that there's **no such thing as a self-made Christian**. It just isn't something one person can do. But if you really want to be a follower of Jesus, and if you want to be the person God yearns for you to become, you have to have help -- a little extra support (like Moses, I think, and the Hebrew people). We need someone to step in and lend a hand -- an encouraging word, a hug, a handshake, a pat on the back. And

we need people who'll give us what my grandma would call "a good talking to." Oh, and we all need people **praying** for us and **caring** for us and **reminding** us always that God is with us and for us. And with all those helping hands, we can *be* who God calls us to be.

Ah, but remember -- remember -- if we really want to be the people or the church God longs for us to be, we have to be willing to do that for others. Because they're in the same boat we are, you know. They need the same love, the same support, the same care, the same encouragement and prayer and support that we do. And we can do that. We can love them. And encourage them. And lift them up in our prayers ... It's why we're here. To be *together* the people of God. To stand on the hill and lift up the cross so that people will see and *remember* that they're God's people, too. ☩

When Fred Craddock retired from teaching in the seminary at Emory he took a little church in Fannin County up in the Georgia mountains. And the pastors in that community take turns serving as the *chaplain of the week* at the County Hospital. And Fred took *his* turn, he said. And the week he was on watch, he said, a baby was born. And there aren't so many born there, I guess. Because it's a tiny little hospital -- only thirty beds there. But a baby was born. And that morning, he said, he saw all these people gathered round, looking through the glass at the nursery. And there on the other side was that wee little baby.

And he walked up and said, "Is it a boy or a girl?"

"It's a girl," they said.

"Oh, a little girl," he said. "What's her name?"

"Elizabeth."

And Fred smiled and said, "Well, is the father over here in this group?"

“No.” And he looked back over the other way, and leaning against the wall, was a young man who looked as if he could use a little sleep, he thought. And he said, “I’m the father.”

And Fred said, “The Baby’s name Elizabeth?”

And the young man said, “Yeah.”

“Well she’s a beautiful baby,” Fred told him. And she was. She was. And she was squirming -- and you couldn’t hear her through the window - - but she was squirming around all red-faced. And Fred thought the young father might be concerned. Because she was screaming -- just screaming her little head off... So Fred said, “Now, she’s not sick. It’s good for babies to scream and do all that, you know. Clears out their lungs and gets their voices going. It’s all right,” he said.

And the young father said, “Oh, I know she’s not sick,” he said. “But she’s mad as ...” Well you know what he said. And so did he after he said it, I think. And he said, “Pardon me, Reverend, I didn’t mean to say that.” And Fred said, “It’s all right,” he said. “Why is she so mad?”

And he said, “Well, wouldn’t you be? One minute you’re with God in heaven and the next minute you’re in Georgia.”

And Fred thought, “Boy, I’ve got myself a real mountain theologian on my hands. This guy’s been reading Plato,” he thought, “or Hallmark or *something*. And Fred said, “You believe she was with God before she came here?”

He said, “Oh, yeah.”

And Fred said, “Do you think she’ll remember? ...”

And the young man said, ***“Well, that’s up to her mother and me. It’s up to the church. We’ve got to see that she remembers ... ‘cause if she forgets, she’s a goner.”***

That’s why we’re here, you know. We’re all here, together, to help each other remember who we really are -- that we are God’s children, little ones who need him -- who depend on him, really. And we’re here to remind each other that we’re part of a family called church, and that God is here with us -- every last one of us. But that isn’t all, you know. There’s so much more ... **For you see, God brought us here to *this hill*, to lift up the cross, the love of God in Jesus our Lord, by the way we live, by the way we *are*, so that others will see and know that God loves them, too.**

Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter, and not just do what is most convenient for us. Strength is for service, not status. Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, "How can I help?"

This is the word which is given for you. Amen

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