

“Lifeboat 14” January 25, 2008

As I was beginning work on the message for today, it was at the end of the year, and all the newscasts were filled with the most memorable stories of 2008. Of course, there were things like the election, the economic crisis and the bailouts, and more. One of the stories I read online, however, ate at me more than any of those. It was termed one of the “most shocking stories of 2008.” You may remember it. It was about a woman whose name was Esmin Green, who had been waiting nearly 24 hours in a New York psychiatric ward emergency room on June 19. when she fell face down on the floor.

The whole incident was captured on a surveillance video, and shows that neither hospital staff nor other patients did anything at all for her; in fact, she was ignored. An hour and three minutes after the video showed that she had collapsed in convulsions, and nearly thirty minutes after she stopped moving, a hospital employee was shown approaching her, and nudging her with her foot. It was then, and only then, that help was summoned, but it was too late. Esmin Green had died.

The hospital released a statement afterwards, stating that it was “shocked and distressed by this situation.” The statement continued by saying, “It is clear that some of our employees failed to act based on our compassionate standards of care.” I’d say! This falls pretty far short of anything close to compassion!

Now, I don’t share this story as an indictment of uncaring hospital workers, but rather as a wake-up call for all of us. We may not have been in that place at that time, but my guess is that most of us have been in situations not all that different. My question is: How did we respond? Did we turn the other way? Did we ignore the situation? Did we try to help, or summon help?

I’d like to believe, and I suspect I’m right in doing so, that those of us here this morning would have moved into action and tried in whatever way we could to help. We may not have been able to alter the eventual outcome, but it would not have been for lack of care and effort. Hopefully, in one way or another, we would have tried to throw a lifeline to the person in need.

Now, you may be wondering why this service is entitled, “Lifeboat 14.” It has to do with the sinking of the *Titanic*, after it hit an iceberg in the North Atlantic. A man by the name of Lowe was a crewmember on the *Titanic*, and he was the one who was commanding lifeboat 14 as it was lowered into the water, filled for the most part with women and children. Lowe and his crew rowed off about 150 yards from the *Titanic*. There he herded together five boats and redistributed the passengers from his boat into the other boats.

He then asked for volunteers to go back with him to try to rescue others, and he and the volunteers managed to pick up 4 survivors. He rigged a sail to the lifeboat, and when a rescue boat was sighted, he picked

up a few other lifeboats and towed them along as he headed toward the oncoming steamer. In all, he saved some 20-30 passengers from drowning. His lifeboat was the only one that went back toward the wreckage searching for and rescuing survivors.

It seems to me that Lowe was acting in the way our Bible passage for today urges us to act. Our version from The Message puts it like this: **“So speak encouraging words to one another. Build up hope so you’ll all be together in this, no one left out, no one left behind...Gently encourage the stragglers, and reach out for the exhausted, pulling them to their feet. Be patient with each person, attentive to individual needs.”**

You see, this passage is about how we are to live if we want to describe ourselves as faithful and loving people; it is with compassion and care, offering encouragement and hope, reaching out to others and helping them to their feet. It’s about offering a lifeline through our attention and concern.

How can we be like Lowe and Lifeboat 14? Where are the opportunities we have to throw a lifeline to those in need?

Actually, the idea for this message came to mind because St. Luke’s UMC recently just received a paddle that has the words, “Lifeboat 14,” on it. It was given in recognition of all the ways the church has been so helpful to United Christmas Service families during the holidays. For years, St. Luke’s has been one of the largest supporters of that organization, helping many to have a more joyful Christmas than they might otherwise have.

As I thought about that, I realized that you and I know folks who are like Lowe in Lifeboat 14. For example, there’s Dick and Wynn Tinkham, who are part of The Garden. For years, the two of them have been heavily involved in helping those in need in Indianapolis. Years ago, they worked with restaurants to collect unused food that could be re-used for the hungry, and most recently, they have again taken the lead in working with Food Link families.

Through that organization and their work as lifeline throwers, some of us have had the same opportunity. Those who sponsored Food Link families over Christmas were like Lowe on Lifeboat 14. By helping a family in need, we were throwing a lifeline and offering a little bit of hope to some of the poorest of the poor.

I like to think that The Garden has a little bit of Lifeboat 14 in it with our 10% program. As many of you know, we give 10% of the monies that you donate in our watering cans every Sunday to a different charitable organization each month. Throughout the course of a year, we are able to help 12 organizations in their work of offering lifelines to the poor, the hungry, those struggling with life issues. In helping groups like the J.R. Dalton Food Drive, or the Lord’s Pantry, founded by the late Lucius Newsome, we have had the opportunity to be a lifeline for many of the people who are in need.

Those are some of the ways we as a group can be Lifeboat 14 for others, but there are also ways in which each of us as individuals can offer a lifeline to

someone who's hurting. Think back to what the Bible passage said: "Speak encouraging words to one another; build up hope." Encouraging one another, and being hope-filled could be just what the doctor ordered for someone who is dejected and discouraged.

For example, it goes without saying that economic times are bleak right now. Many are out of work; some are losing their homes; businesses are closing their doors; corporations are struggling at best, failing and filing bankruptcy at worst. It can feel pretty dark when we hear the dire predictions of doom and gloom, but I don't think it has to be that way.

I recall that Jim Collins, in his book, *Good to Great*, talked about how we can move beyond that kind of thinking, and take a step toward what he called "greatness." It is to acknowledge the harsh realities, but to remain positive and hopeful in the face of them. The reality is that, yes, it is a difficult time, but I believe there is some good there, too—something about which to be hopeful.

It seems to me that last Tuesday, our new President encouraged us to do just that. He urged us to change our ways. We can do that if we look toward the possibilities, if we focus on the good; when we do, this situation, too, can be transformed into something positive.

I realize that, in watching our pensions and our savings fade away, this may seem like a Pollyanna-ish thing to say, but I really, really believe there is good to come out of this economic situation. Maybe we'll become less greedy, and less focused on materialistic gains; maybe we'll reset our priorities. Maybe we'll be able to discover what really matters in life, what really counts. Maybe we really will take the high road and live by our highest ideals and values. Maybe we'll discover that there are benefits and rewards in life that are much greater than money can buy.

If we speak encouragingly to others, if we build up hope by every word we say and every step we take, we are offering a lifeline to those who are down and who feel lost. Affirming another person's contributions and talents can turn a tough day into a better one. If we can be attentive and patient with those who try our patience and irritate us the most, we just might find a little love and understanding being born into our hearts, and an entirely different kind of relationship beginning.

It's really all about caring and compassion; it's about getting outside our own self-centered and self-serving ways, and seeing where and how we could be rowing our lifeboat to rescue others. You see, that kind of thing doesn't require money; it just simply means that we look beyond ourselves.

We don't ignore those falling on the floor in convulsions; we don't look down upon those we believe to be less fortunate. When our hearts are filled with compassion and love, we begin to see every person we encounter as someone of worth, value and dignity. It's honoring every individual. As Ann Landers once wrote: "Keep in mind that the true meaning of an individual is how he treats a person who can do him absolutely no good."

You see, it has to do with the compassion and care we show everyone and every part of creation. When we see our fellow human beings as real people, we can no longer ignore or disregard the cries of those who are hurting. It means we get in our lifeboat and begin rowing, finding ways to rescue and make life better for everyone.

Not only will we see individuals in new ways and find a means to help, but I believe it will become bigger than that. We just might begin to see how we're brothers and sisters with all people around the world, and we will begin to understand the kinds of things with which they're dealing; maybe we'll see with a new set of eyes. No longer will we tolerate innocent children in Africa dying of AIDS, for example. Because we care, we will get in our lifeboat, offer a lifeline, and make a difference. We will act in ways that build hope for the whole world, and make this world a better place for all of us!

I guess there's a question we need to answer: Is our lifeboat at the ready, and our lifeline ready to throw? I hope so.

Closing:

I believe that going like Lifeboat 14 is like something Leo Rosten once said. He wrote, "I think the purpose of life is to be useful, to be responsible, to be honorable, to be compassionate. It is, after all, to matter, to count, to stand for something, to have made some difference that you lived at all." I agree. How about you?

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.

