

The people you see running in when everyone else is running out.” That phrase has become kind of synonymous with first responders — firefighters, police officers, paramedics and other emergency personnel. And these days we are more than well aware that emergency response workers are quick to go into dangerous situations to help others. But in some cases, they are not quite the *first* responders on the scene. In some emergencies, that role is filled by whoever happens to be on the spot — sometimes, persons who are not trained professionals in emergency response.

Maybe it’s a driver who witnesses a bad crash on the highway and stops to offer help. Or it’s a passerby who sees a house on fire and rushes in to help the residents get out. Or, perhaps it’s a person who afterwards comforts a gravely-wounded victim who will expire before emergency workers arrive.

Following the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, a coalition of organizations came together to develop a program called “Stop the Bleed,” which teaches civilians how to administer first aid after a shooting. The program even supplies “bleed kits,” which contain essential supplies like latex free gloves, tourniquets, gauze, and bandages that can help stop hemorrhaging.

We might also use the term “first responders” to characterize the entry of Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke into the district of Macedonia, which is the story told in our Acts reading for today. While not summoned by a radio call or an alarm, as emergency workers usually are today, Paul and his coworkers received the 911 call through a nighttime vision in which a man from Macedonia pleaded, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” Paul’s team understood this as a call from God, and they realized that the help needed was a proclamation of the gospel in that region. Thus, they set sail from Troas, where the vision had occurred and soon were sharing the gospel in Philippi, the leading city of Macedonia.

Which begs the question, what would your response be if you discovered that you are a first responder in someone’s search for faith? Might it be something along the lines of, “What, Who, me? I’m no professional”? Or maybe you would say, “I would suggest you talk to my pastor.” But keep in mind that *you are* the one to whom the person addressed their 911 call to, and more than likely the person may have some kind of connection to you that caused him or her to speak about their need in the first place.

And because of that connection, you may be the only one with the bleed kit to stop the person's spiritual hemorrhaging.

While not everyone has formal theological training, more than likely you can at the very least tell the person what your faith means to you. And depending on your own experience of Christ, you may even be able to address a person's sense of emptiness, by sharing that the gospel gives meaning to lives that seem to be without purpose. If that appears to be the case, you might also be able to address the person's loneliness, explaining that Christ is a comforting presence that can help us weather dark moments when we feel alone.

When we are open to the leading of God's Spirit we often discover that we are able to help people face their fears by talking about the calmness and spiritual strength the gospel has fostered within us. We can also share with others, who are burdened down by the worries of this world, how they can make their first approach to God, by sharing the basics of a simple prayer with them. In other words, we can be the one running toward the person in distress as a first responder would do.

Probably the clearest Macedonian call for us comes when, in normal conversation, someone invites us to be honest about our faith. Our story tonight says that in Philippi, Paul sat down and spoke to some women whom he encountered in a place of prayer near the river. Take note that he didn't talk down to them, or try to scare them about the terror of hell, if they didn't receive Christ. He just spoke to them. Luke reports that one of those ladies listening was Lydia, and that "the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul."

Opened her heart? What does that mean, if not, that something was bleeding inside her? And that happens to lots of people. There is a story about an English biologist named Thomas Henry Huxley, who was an agnostic. He died in 1895, but some time before that, he attended a party at a country house where guests stayed over the weekend. On Sunday, most guests prepared to go to church, but Huxley declined. Instead, he approached a fellow guest known to be a committed Christian, and he said, "Suppose you

don't go to church today. Suppose you stay at home and tell me what your Christian faith means to you, and why you are a Christian."

The man, knowing Huxley was a great thinker, replied, "But you could demolish my arguments in an instant. I'm not clever enough to argue with you." Huxley replied, "I don't want to argue with you; I just want you to tell me what Christ means to you." So the man stayed home from church and spoke with Huxley about his faith. When they finished, Huxley said, "I would give my right hand if only I could believe like that."

But that was back in the 19th century, and today we're more concerned with how something like that might play out in the present. Our colleagues in the work place, our friends in our neighborhoods, or our acquaintances at the fitness center, or golf club; may have a sense that our faith is important to us, and that we go to church regularly. Most of our conversations with these acquaintances deal with routine, everyday things. But as we develop relationships with others, sometimes something more serious comes up.

Perhaps the other person asks for our opinion about some ethical matter, or wants to talk about a personal problem — these are perfect opportunities to openly share something about our faith. Let's say Mike is having lunch with Jason. They're both loan officers at a major bank in town. Jason is halfway into a Swiss cheese and mushroom double-decker hamburger when he wipes the ketchup off his mouth with a napkin, lays it down, and says, "So, Mike, you go to church. What does your church believe in anyway?"

Mike is about to answer, when Jason goes on to explain, "We got a kid, you know. Tara is 4 years old now, and Carrie and I are thinking maybe we should start going to church, make it a habit, get Tara to Sunday School, or something — learn some Bible stories like Moses and the Ark." He continues to tell his story. He and his wife both had very uneven religious experiences when they were growing up. They never were in one church very long, and so they don't know too much about God, religion, or church, but they believe it might be a good thing for their family.

Mike could have told Jason that it was Noah and the Ark, not Moses. He could have just given his coworker a shallow, nonresponsive answer — talking in generalities about worship services. But their conversation allowed Mike to ask the other man about his faith experience, and to share a little about his own. Mike didn't go into great detail, but he did talk about what his faith meant to him, the role it played in his life, and so on. Jason appreciated the feedback. And why not? They were friends.

The subject had come up naturally. And Mike didn't try to beat Jason over the head with the Bible. Surely in moments like that, when someone is asking us for information, and inviting us to be a first responder to them, we can be humble witnesses for Christ and share our faith in an honest way. And if we would like a little extra help with doing things like this it might be good for us to have a bleed kit ready and in our possession. And we should have at least three things in it:

First, we should have some ideas prepared beforehand about what knowing Christ means to us personally. Maybe something like, "Because Jesus is in my life, I no longer _____." Or "Because Jesus is in my life, I've been able to let go of _____." Or "Because Jesus is in my life, my outlook is more positive," and then explain why.

Second, it may be helpful for us to be prepared to teach someone how to pray a beginner's prayer, such as, "Lord Jesus, come into my life, and help me follow you." And of course.... we can always share the Lord's prayer with them. After all, if it was good enough for Jesus to use to instruct his own disciples on how to pray, it is definitely a great starting point for us when we're teaching others how to do it.

Third, it wouldn't hurt to have a suggestion or two ready about where the person might learn and grow more in their faith experience. That might include an invitation to accompany you to church or, if they are a reader, maybe you can suggest that they read something like C.S. Lewis' book *Mere Christianity*, or you can introduce them to one of your favorite Christian authors who has spoken deeply to the language of faith in your life.

Please keep in mind that I'm not trying to make all this sound simpler than it is, or to imply that a few well-chosen words are all we need. But the fact is, people in search of meaning, who are trying to fill

an empty place inside themselves, often begin by talking to someone they think might be able to point them in the right direction. And if that someone is us, we become, in effect, first responders!

As is often the case, just as first responders aren't usually the ones who provide the whole solution, they are the ones who do their best to stop the bleeding, and then send the person to a place where more help is available. If a moment comes where someone within our circle of acquaintances appears to be seeking faith, may God make us willing to be a first responder to them. And don't ever forget that in those times God has also given you the gift of the Holy Spirit as part of your bleed kit. Thanks be to God. Amen.