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Ebola, 9/11, and Foolishness

There has been a lot on the news lately about the Ebola outbreak that has hit West Africa, most notably Liberia and Sierra Leone. Ebola is a frightening disease as there is no confirmed cure and it appears to take a strong majority of those who contract it. Add to this it's very transferable nature, and things get scary in a hurry. Between 1976 and 2013 there were 2,361 confirmed cases of Ebola worldwide that resulted in death, but in the last six months alone there have been over 2,200 confirmed deaths. And there are many more than presently have the disease who will most likely die. Sierra Leone recently even called for a nationwide lockdown in which everyone must stay in their homes for three days with the hope of stopping the spread of the disease.

One of the reasons that we know about the outbreak of Ebola in the U.S. is because of its scary infectious nature and the grim consequences of contracting the virus, but we also know about it because of the fate of some U.S. personnel who were helping West African victims. If you check the news reports even on an infrequent basis you probably have heard of Dr. Kent Brantly or perhaps Nancy Writebol both of whom were serving at a hospital in Liberia. They sought to bring their training to bear in helping those who had Ebola, but in the process both contracted Ebola themselves. When things became dire, the organizations that supported their work flew them back to the United States. Here they received good care, an experimental treatment, and lots of loving support and by the grace of God are on their way to full recovery.

Not long after their return to the U.S., however, some news commentators did what they normally do, they commented on Brantly and Writebol's service in West Africa and return to the U.S. for treatment. I was surprised that some of the commentators said the efforts of these two to help out Ebola victims in another country was foolish. There are enough problems here in the States, it was said; they were potentially bringing back the disease to the United States, and

they had cost their organization lots of money in having to bring them home.

Now, I suppose that one way to look at the situation is to say that Brantly and Writebol were foolish and should not have gone to do what they did. Indeed there are lots of problems in the States, the cost of being evacuated was great, and the possibility of bringing Ebola to the States was certainly possible. But I tend to look at the situation in a little different way. You see, it seems to me that rather than saying that their kind of foolishness should be not discouraged, I think we ought to be calling for more kinds of fools like them...more kinds of people who are well-trained and prepared to take thoughtful risks for the sake of others.

Today is September 11, and I am quite sure that each of you know where you were thirteen years ago when the twin towers went down in New York City. What a horrific scene that was. And one element of that horrific scene was the loss of what New York City called their finest: first responders. Although the buildings were aflame and there was evidence that they were giving way, New York's first responders did what might be called a foolish thing, they risked life and limb to save those who were inside.

But I don't really think any of us believe they did something foolish. They did what we hoped they would do; they put themselves on the line for the sake of helping others who desperately needed their help. Last summer I was in New York City and just a block or two away from the 9/11 memorial is a mural completed in memory of the first responders who lost their lives on 9/11. Here is a picture of that mural that I took.



I suppose you could call those who lost their lives in their effort to save others on 9/11 foolish. But it seems to me it was a good kind of foolishness, a foolishness that we should not decry, but one that we encourage, a foolishness that says “I’ve got certain skills and abilities and time and resources, and while it is not necessarily my responsibility to put them out there for every disaster or tragedy or epidemic or social ill that comes along, at some point along the road it’s a good thing to be a little less than what some might call prudent and put myself out there for the good of others.”

Jesus once told a parable; it may be one you heard before. We call it the parable of the Good Samaritan. The parable starts with a Jewish man having been robbed and beaten to a pulp while traveling between two cities. Two men, religious leaders in fact, saw the victim, but they did nothing. Jesus did not say why they did nothing. Perhaps it was because they didn’t want to get their hands dirty, maybe it was because they were in a hurry somewhere. Or perhaps it was because they knew it would be costly to care for the man. Who knows what the reason was. Then comes along a Samaritan man, a man who in many ways should have been glad to see a Jewish man suffer. A man who later in the parable we are told had business that needed to be taken care of. And yet, this man stops and helps the victim, puts him on his donkey and takes him to town to care for him, and pays for his expenses. I am sure that none of these things were on the Samaritan’s agenda for the day. And I am quite sure he could have ignored the dying Jewish man for the sake of being prudent. But he didn’t. He was what I would call a fool, the kind of fool that gets remembered and remembered not for being foolhardy but because he took what he had to help those who needed what he could give. Indeed he was the hero of the story.

And I for one think we need a few more fools like that.