

**Pentecost 4A + July 2, 2017**  
**Matthew 10:40-42: "Safe at Home"**

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I have loved baseball for as long as I can remember. Growing up near Los Angeles, I went to sleep almost every night during the baseball season with the Dodgers' great announcer Vin Scully in my ear. Listening or going to baseball games remains one of my favorite things to do.

A lot of people feel as I do. But even among all those who cherish baseball as America's national pastime, even on this holiday weekend there are many who will hurl insults at umpires when close calls don't favor their team: "You're blind, ump!" "You need to go to confession after that one!" "You drop more calls than AT&T!"

But umpires are people, too. Because their profession commands them to tell the truth—to "call them as they see them"—they may perform acts of truth-telling off the field, as well.

Such an act caught my eye as I skimmed the news late Wednesday night. Perhaps you saw this story out of Pittsburgh. A young umpire named John Tumpane was in town that day to call a game between the Pittsburgh Pirates and the Tampa Bay Rays. He was strolling across the Roberto Clemente Bridge toward the stadium when he saw a woman about 30 feet ahead of him put one foot up on the railing. Suddenly she had her leg all the way over and puled the rest of her body over as well.

Tumpane scurried over and then calmly asked her, "Hey, what's going on?" She told him she was just trying to get a better view of the city. Tumpane said, "Oh, you don't want to do that,

it's just as good from over here." "I'm better off on this side, just let me go," she insisted as he gently hooked his arm around hers. He replied, "No, let's just talk this out and get you back over here." "No one wants to help me," she said, "just let me go." "I want to help you," said Tumpane. "You'll forget me tomorrow," she said. "No," he assured her, "I'll never forget you."

Tumpane then wrapped both arms around the woman's back and mouthed to a passerby to call 911. Suddenly she slipped off the bridge, and Tumpane ended up holding her entire weight over open water until rescue workers arrived 10 minutes later. During that time, he said was thinking, "God, this has got to be a good ending, not a bad ending." And it was: "Safe at Home," one headline read.

Afterward the umpire, who's been in major league baseball for only a year, insisted he was not a hero. "I just happened to be there," he said. "I think I've been a caring person in my life. I saw somebody in need, and it looked like a situation to obviously insert myself and help out."

In Matthew's gospel, just before today's reading, Jesus has called the disciples and is about to send them out. He's told them what to expect as they travel around proclaiming the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near. It won't be easy, Jesus says: They will encounter rejection. They will be persecuted. They will cause division within households between those who choose to follow Jesus and those who don't.

In today's reading, however Jesus is talking to them about the *recipients* of the good news. Those people will receive from God the same reward of righteousness that the disciples will in proclaiming the kingdom. Jesus tells them, "whoever welcomes a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous."

This invites us more deeply into the story of the umpire and the suicidal woman on the bridge. John Tumpane said that he did only what any caring person would do. But the woman was obviously willing, on some level, to receive his efforts to save her. If he had approached her angrily and in a panic, she could have either quickly jumped or violently wrestled herself away from him and then jumped. But she didn't, because his voice was gentle, his words calming, his demeanor loving.

Here in Matthew the word "receive" doesn't simply mean take. It has the deeper connotation of accepting, of welcoming into one's heart the thing that is offered. Of course, the way in which one offers something depends on how it is received. John Tumpane approached the woman with compassion. He told her he wanted to help. And he told her that he would never forget her.

This provides a model for the ministry that we all do, in our various walks of life. God has called the church of Christ, through the Holy Spirit, to bring to all people the good news of God's infinite love, mercy, and forgiveness. God has called us through the gospel to live in the way that Jesus commands us, and we respond in faith. About this response, Martin Luther writes in his Small Catechism that "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith."

The success of our mission in the world, depends on how we live out our faith and whether our proclamation of God's kingdom is welcomed.

How do we lead our lives? Do we boast about our righteousness in a way that condemns other who we think aren't as holy as we are? Or do we live out of our baptism as a new person in Christ, having been freed of the chains of sin and living and loving fully, as God desires for us?

How do we talk about God? Do we go out into the streets, harass people, shout that they'd better follow Jesus or else? Or do we bring the truth of God's mercy and love gently into our conversations as the Spirit calls us to do?

If you don't know how to talk about God—if you are reluctant, if you don't know what to say, like the prophet Jeremiah when God first called him—just tell people what you know about Jesus and God out of your own experience.

If you refuse to welcome God, through Christ, through those who are workers in the kingdom—If shame keeps you from accepting offers of assistance, or if guilt makes you turn away kind words—remember that when you welcome a righteous person you receive the very same reward that the giving person receives—the reward of knowing that it was Christ himself you welcomed.

Umpire John Tumpane was being Christ to that woman on the bridge. His quick action, his humanity, and God's grace brought the woman exactly what she needed. And for her willingness to receive him, for being Christ to him in return, she gained her life.

Amen.