

*“The Parable of the Undocumented
Immigrant in a Boat”
A Parable for Our Times*

*(Part IV of V in sermon series,
“Extravagant Love and Welcome:
Uniting All in One Community”)*

*Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45c; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew
16:21-28; Luke 10:25-37*

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 3, 2017, 22nd Sunday of Ordinary Time, 17th Proper, dedicated to all the men, women, and children who have died in and been devastated by Hurricane Harvey and to all the first responders and volunteers who have saved lives, raised money and made a difference in the aftermath of the storm and rains and to my friend, Harvey Hook, who has been a Good Samaritan all his life and always to the glory of God!

“The Parable of the Undocumented Immigrant in a Boat”

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(Part V in V part series on “Extravagant Love and Welcome: Uniting All in One Community”)

One of the purposes of preaching is to reflect the times in which we live and move and have our being. We need to have a Bible in one hand and newspaper in the other hand. Today, I will be doing that. Today’s sermon – the fifth and final in the sermon series on Open and Affirming – was slated to

reflect on the part of our ONA statement which says we welcome and love all no matter what our socioeconomic background or political and theological differences.

What better way to reflect on the meaning of these words than to examine how this has been lived out in the real-world disaster of Hurricane Harvey. We have a crisis in Texas and Louisiana truly of Biblical Proportion. This has been called a once in a 1,000-year flood. In other words, we have never in our lifetime or the history of our nation witnessed anything like this before.

While a hurricane and the week-long rains that followed have devastated the southwest Gulf Coast, one of the defining characteristics of this horrific event has been the response of people throughout the region and across the country. It has been inspirational beyond belief. In a few minutes, we will all be given the opportunity to dig in our wallets and respond as best as we are able with an offering to address the horrors of Harvey. For now, let's reflect on the Good Samaritans in boats. We could lift up many stories – but the thousands of boat people of Harvey who have saved thousands of lives have proven to be an immeasurable blessing.

Let me begin by retelling a familiar story from the Gospel of Luke. It is rewritten in our context - a hurricane in 2017. You

know it as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. For today and our Times, I call it “The Parable of the Undocumented Immigrant in a Boat.”

**Luke 10:25-37 – revised version, by Tim Ahrens,
September 2017**

*Just then a religion scholar stood up with a question to test Jesus.
“Teacher, what do I need to do to get eternal life?”*

He answered, “What’s written in God’s Law? How do you interpret it?”

*He said, “That you love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and muscle and intelligence—and that you love your neighbor as well as you do yourself.” “Good answer!” said Jesus.
“Do it and you’ll live.”*

Looking for a loophole, the religious scholar asked, “And just how would you define ‘neighbor?’”

Jesus answered by telling a story. “There was once a Texas Businessman traveling from Houston to Port Arthur. On the way, he was overwhelmed by a Hurricane named Harvey. The hurricane wiped him out, knocked him out of his truck and forced him to climb on the roof of a house as flood waters rose around him. Luckily, a pastor came by in a nice boat making his way to safety, but when he saw him he turned his boat away and acted

like he didn't hear him calling for help. Then an active layman in the local church showed up; he also went the other way in his boat – despite the man's cries for help.

Then, an undocumented Immigrant came by in his little rowboat. When he saw the man's condition, his heart went out to him. He gave him first aid, water and the only food he had in his boat. Then he lifted him into his boat, took him to a shelter, and made him comfortable. When he knew the man was safe, he gave the people at the shelter all the money he had in his pocket to feed the man, saying, 'Take good care of him. If it costs any more, let me know and I will pay you back. Now, I need to get back out there and see if anyone else needs help.'

Jesus asked, "What do you think? Which of the three became a neighbor to the man stranded in Hurricane Harvey?"

"The one who treated him kindly," the religion scholar responded. Jesus said, "Go and do the same."

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Following the devastation brought by the landfall and rainfall of Hurricane Harvey, people all over Texas and beyond came to the rescue of people they did not even know. Rescuers from Florida came by the hundreds saying, *“people are always coming to help us in Florida. It is high time that we help others.”* “Good Samaritans” emerged to help. They were Good Samaritans in boats.

Boaters grabbed their kayaks, aluminum skiffs, canoes, airboats, outboard-powered center consoles and more, cruising past street signs and powerless traffic lights to collect not only friends and neighbors, but also strangers and pets too. Social media lit up with simple posts that said so much, like this one from Texas native Diane Alston: *“People came with boats, supplies. People giving rides.”*

Average guys with a ski boat who might normally be at a local ramp on a Saturday morning instead prepped for launch from a street beneath an overpass, where a news camera spotted them. When asked what they planned to do, one boater said, *“go try to save some lives.”*

Ray Ortega, an oilfield tool salesman who usually fishes his 23-footer on the Gulf of Mexico, chasing speckled trout and redfish, pulled 10 to 15 people at a time out of the

floodwaters, according to [NPR](#). *“We rescued 53 people into the night,”* boater Ortega told the news agency.

A Texas A&M student told [Soundings Trade Only](#) that, *“We were actually launching boats off on I-45 on an overpass,”* adding that he alone estimated 200 to 250 people had climbed into his boat seeking help.

Then there was Louisiana’s Cajun Navy. The Cajun Navy, born in the floodwaters of 2005’s Hurricane Katrina, showed up in Texas with a flotilla of about 20 boats, organizing its efforts on Facebook and a [walkie-talkie app called Zello](#). *“Our goal is to help people get out if they are trapped in their homes or apartments, get them to safety,”* one of the boaters said.

As official 911 and 311 emergency channels became overloaded, social media became a makeshift VHF channel 16, with people posting their locations on rooftops and everyday “dispatchers” coordinating the arrival of volunteer boaters. A website called [Houston Harvey Rescue](#) popped up as a sort of Uber version of boating rescues, letting people with boats register right alongside people who needed help, so they could geographically find each other. Even as rain continued to pummel the region, thousands of rescues had been [logged on the site’s map](#).

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) calls this type of effort a “whole community response,” one that presumes people will help other people, instead of all of them being [categorized as victims](#). I call it a miracle.

Even commercial interests pitched in. [Bass Pro Shops](#) donated more than 80 Tracker boats to help with rescue efforts, while [Walmart bought 2,000 kayaks from KL Outdoor](#), which paid to ship them from Michigan to Texas.

“I think you’re seeing the best in our country when we have these situations like what’s occurring now in Texas,” KL Outdoors’ CEO, Chuck Smith, told WOOD TV. *“It lets you know that if you ever got put in that situation, the other folks around the country would step up and help you.”* (“Hurricane Harvey: Good Samaritan Boaters Help Save Lives,” By Kim Kavin, August 30, 2017, boat.com).

I am sure you have seen the boats – moving through the devastation and often fast-moving currents from the flood ravaged territory in center city Houston all the way to the rural Texas and Louisiana. It was a volunteer armada of angels. In one video, I saw a man lifting a Seik family onto his boat. When asked why he was doing this, he said, *“I am a follower of Jesus. He told us all to help all our neighbors so I am doing it.”*

Those without boats have been rallying people on the ground everywhere across the Texas/Louisiana coast. People are being good neighbors to those they did not know. The American Red Cross has put out a call for an additional 80,000 volunteers to come now in the efforts to clean-up after the disaster. We are far from done with Harvey.

So, what is it about being a Good Samaritan? Why does this story – 2000 years old – make headlines still to this day? There is something penetrating about it. It cuts through the stories about price gauging and taking advantage of neighbors. It cuts through the stories of selfish motivations for helping others.

We don't help to help ourselves. We don't help to “earn eternal life.” We don't help to gain God's attention. We help because it is the right thing to do.

Even in the midst of helping our neighbors, some folks are looking for the loopholes. They want to know – “who is my neighbor?” The irony of the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Renamed today, “*The Parable of the Undocumented Immigrant in a Boat*”) is this: The *Good* Samaritan was the least likely person for the religious scholar of Jesus' time to see as “the good guy” in this story. The Samaritan was a pariah. He was the outcast. He was the one that the people of his

times were trying to drive out of the land. I have named him “The Undocumented Immigrant” not to make a political statement but to truly define who he was in his time. He was shunned and judged by the society around him. And Jesus made a positive example of him. He was the undocumented immigrant of his time.

So how is it that the one we least likely see as a hero becomes the great hero of our story? How is it that we now name hospitals “Good Samaritan Hospital” and our funds for helping others as The Good Samaritan Fund? How is it that headlines NOW read, “Good Samaritans in Boats?”

We love this story. But do we love the Samaritan or The Undocumented Immigrant? Jesus knew this story would stick! He knew that by turning the world upside down – by making the pariah the hero – his followers would have to be different. He knew that scales would fall from the eyes of those who were blinded by their own self-serving ways and that people would have to see the world through different lenses.

To this day - our challenge is to get past our socioeconomic blind spots. Our challenge is to get rid of our political divisions and see the men, women, and children being helped and helping save lives as all equal in the eyes of God. Our

challenge is to overcome our theological and educational divisions keep us apart and not allow them to conquer us.

To overcome our challenges, we have to get in our boats and get to work. We have to rescue and not judge; serve all and not question who we serve; and pay forward, knowing full well we not get paid back. This is the way of Jesus. **The Apostle Paul got Jesus!** Writing to the early Christians who were persecuted in Rome, Paul writes these words – memorable for all time:

9-10 Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.¹¹⁻¹³ Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."²⁰⁻²¹ ...if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty,

*get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness.
Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.*

In the end, all that we need to become a truly open and affirming church, a church that welcomes and loves all people extravagantly is to follow Jesus. So, let's get in our boats. We have some lives to save – our own and our neighbors – Amen.

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