

**There is No “I” in “Follow Me”**  
**July 15, 2018**  
**Northminster Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Michael D. Kirby**  
**Romans 12:1-8 and Luke 9:23-25**

It took every one of them. On Saturday, July 23rd, the Wild Boars European football club had completed its practice session but weren't expected back at the gates of the church that served as their sponsor for at least another hour. Ekapol, their quiet, reserved, 25-year-old coach, worked as a concierge at the church — the Buddhist Temple called Pharathat Doi Wao — a temple famous for being the first temple one reaches in Thailand after crossing the border from Myanmar, also known as Burma. For that reason, it's home to many stateless people who escaped from oppression in Myanmar over the years, people who have no country and no passport. Ekapol is one of those people, studying Buddhist practices while he works at the Temple and volunteers as a soccer coach.

We now know the boys and the coach intended to spend one hour in the famous caves until the flood waters from recent rains entered the caves from thousands of crevasses some miles away from the cave itself. For the next 10 days, the community worried and turned to visitors in their midst. The Thai Navy Seals were brave, but they didn't know these caves. But British cave enthusiast Vern Unsworth did. He'd spent years making those caves his second home. He knew every nook and cranny. But he wasn't experienced in cave diving rescue.

However, he knew three friends who were — British divers and rescue specialists John Volanthen, Rick Stanton and Robert Harper. When asked, they flew to the site without hesitation and went to work. And so did US Air Force rescue divers and diving rescue specialists from Belgium, Australia, Scandinavia and China. They provided support as the three Brits began the tedious search to find the team.

It took them nine days. Once the boys were discovered, perched on a ledge in a small room, everything kicked into gear. Eventually, 10,000 people would join the efforts, running pumps to try and get the flood waters out, providing food and rest for the divers, and organizing the more than 20 tons of rescue equipment.

About 3,400 miles away, Harry Harris was getting ready for vacation. Dr. Harris, an anesthesiologist from Adelaide, had been planning this vacation with his best friend and their partners for months. It would be the perfect break from their daily grind. His life-long friend, Dr. Craig Challen, a veterinarian from Perth, Australia, was also looking forward to their trip. Then a phone call came.

The British divers Volanthen and Stanton had been the ones who found the boys and their coach, and they were weak and tired. This was not going to be easy and there was only one person who had the knowledge they needed, Dr. Harry Harris, a 30-year cave diver, whose medical specialty beyond anesthesia was underwater cave rescue and the many medical challenges it poses.

Drs. Harris and Challen, his dive partner for three decades, cancelled their vacations and went to Thailand. Eventually, Harris and Challen would travel into the caves to assess the boys and their coach and the four Thai Navy officers who stayed with them from the day they were discovered until they were rescued.

Volanthen said this about the good doctor: “Dr. Harry, the Australian doctor, he’s very good; he’s got a very good bedside manner; he’s got a very bouncy Australian accent, and they seemed to find that quite relaxing and reassuring.”

Harris would be the one to decide in which order the boys would be rescued, from strongest to weakest. He would administer the anti-anxiety medication to each boy to insure they could undertake the hours-long ordeal. And Drs. Harris and Challen would travel into the caves for the beginning of each rescue and follow out the last one taken for that trip. The other divers making that trip were part of teams that took turns, but not Harris and Challen. They made every trip in and were the last out each time — for three days until the coach was safely rescued.

Dr. Harris emerged from the tunnel, just as a new surge of flood waters arrived, raising levels more than three feet in all of the cave and over the ledge the boys had been standing on. Dr. Harris also emerged from the tunnels to discover that his father had died suddenly in the last hours of the rescue.

We learned the coach helped the boys fend off panic and despair by teaching them the meditation exercises he had been learning at the Temple. Think about this for a moment — if not for that coach, they might not have survived; if not for the caver who knew the caves; if not for the two British rescuers who found them; if not for the 10,000 human-sized efforts to lay the rope lines and pump out as much water as they could; if not for the Australian doctor who three days later would have been unreachable on vacation in the Outback; if not for each of their particular gifts and talents, tragedy could have resulted.

One retired Thai Navy Seal passed away in the effort to get adequate numbers of air tanks distributed throughout the 2.5 kilometers each rescue took. Dr. Harris missed his final moments with his father using gifts and talents he had honed over 30 years of rescues. So, there was bitter with the sweet, even in this miraculous series of events.

And none of them is today claiming hero status. They are all pointing at others, or at the boys themselves, as the heroes of this amazing event. Volanthen said: “We are not heroes. What we do is very calculating, very calm. It’s quite the opposite.” Speaking of the four Thai Seals that stayed the entire time and the boys themselves, Harris said: “They are the toughest blokes and kids I’ve ever had the privilege to meet. They are the heroes.”

Why spend half a sermon on an illustration that we’ve all heard or seen something about these last 10 days? Because it’s the perfect example of the point I want to make about these two famous passages: Take up your cross and follow me; present yourself as a living sacrifice.

Every single person, outside of the active service Thai Seals, was there in some voluntary capacity. Each of them risked life and limb and used their gifts and talents not for their own benefit, but for the benefit of the greater good — the rescue of these precious boys and their coach. And every person who has been a part of that rescue has been changed. Perhaps the entire nation, or even the world, has been changed.

One month ago, the coach and two of the boys were pariahs for many in Thailand where an anti-immigrant protectionist minority attacks the stateless Burmese in their midst. Now, the whole nation is calling for those three to receive citizenship.

The cross was Jesus' destiny. It wasn't what he wanted to do; it was what circumstances, and his fully living who he was born to be, brought about. As the one who preached and demonstrated radical acceptance of the outsider, who called the powers-that-be to task when their walk and their talk did not match, he was made a target of hate and fear. Taking up the cross was also something Jesus did for everyone but himself. He had spoken of his belief that God would use his death to demonstrate the power of love and grace over sin and death, and he was vindicated in the resurrection. But it still meant risking all and offering all to and for the very people who were calling for his death.

In Paul's letter to the church in Rome, the apostle reminds us that just as Jesus offered himself throughout his entire ministry as a living sacrifice, we who would follow him are invited to do the same. And Paul's words ring the same chord as those found on our bulletin covers. They are God's promise to Abram and Sarai in the midst of the wilderness way back at the time of the calling of this first family of the faith — grandparents to Islam, Judaism and Christianity: "I will bless you" God says and then tells them why — "so you will be a blessing to the nations."

It's been this way since the very beginning, friends. Each of us is gifted with certain things — privileges, aptitudes, attitudes, strengths, vulnerabilities, abilities and traits that many would consider to be blessings. They are part of what makes us unique, and they are freely given. But they do come with an expectation — one announced in Genesis and Luke and Romans and so many other places.

None of our blessings are for us alone. That's not the design plan. No, from the very beginning, each of those gifts and talents and privileges we have are intended to be used in a way that expresses our gratitude for them in a way that makes the world a better place, a way that shines a light on the goodness of the world and of the One who birthed this world into being and transformed it through his death and resurrection.

What is the unique thing God, Jesus and the Church have to offer the world? The ultimate declaration that it's not about me; it's not about you. Yes, each of us is beloved of God just as we are with no preconditions. But each of us is blessed in ways the world needs, in ways other people need.

Admittedly, the ways that you and I are called to use what we have for the greater good may not result in headlines and globally remembered rescues, but they are no less important to the people who need us, the world that needs us, to the particular person whose life may be changed, whose day may be changed, whose moment may be more positive because of what you are called to do for them and with them.

Some have called the Boomers and the Gen Xers and the Millennials the “Me” generation (usually whoever is in the generation ahead) utterly narcissistic. And there is certainly some evidence to support that all around us. In a season when narcissism is blasted at us from every corner of social and political media, when my view and my comfort and my dreams and my opinions are more important even than facts or reality, this call to each of us to be a living sacrifice is beyond powerful and beyond difficult.

One of the most interesting chapters of the fantastic new documentary about Presbyterian Pastor Fred Rogers, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor,” is how in his own lifetime and since his death, Mr. Rogers has been slandered by many who suggest that he spent too much time making each person feel special and so bred a generation of narcissists.

I want to respectfully suggest that those making those comments actually watch a few episodes of the show and read his writings. The principle emotion that Rogers sought to inspire, along with self-acceptance, was gratitude. A good Presbyterian, Rogers knew that out of gratitude comes the recognition that our blessings are not ours to hoard, but ours to live and to share for the good of all. Yes, it was important to know we are loved but it was equally important to Rev. Fred Rogers that every child understood they were also needed and each had a part to play in making someone else’s day special. Caring for ourselves and our families is essential and noble, but it is never enough to fully express our gratitude and our joy at being made and loved just the way we are.

It took every one of them in Thailand, 10,000 people from around the world. And it took each of them — the British expat, the Belgian rope diver, the Australian anesthesiologist, the Burmese expat coach with meditation training. And it takes every one of us, offering ourselves and our resources for the good of all, not destroying ourselves, not so emptying ourselves out that there is nothing left, but discovering and learning about and developing and honing the gifts each of us have been given. And then seeking out where those gifts are best used to make each of us agents of God’s Good News for the world.

None of us is called to be the Messiah, thankfully; that job has already been filled. But each of us has been gifted with something—that combination of circumstance, opportunity, ability, love and courage that handed Jesus a cross and so changed the world; that handed Dr. Harris a stethoscope and scuba gear and so changed the world; that handed Fred Rogers an idea and creativity and an other-worldly combination of gentleness and strength and so changed the world; and hands you and me gifts, by the grace of God. May we be world changers too. Amen.