

Ma'am

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Psalm 107:1-9 — O give thanks to the LORD, for the LORD is good; God's steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, those God redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south. Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and God delivered them from their distress; God led them by a straight way, until they reached an inhabited town. Let them thank the LORD for this steadfast love, for God's wonderful works to humankind. For God satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry God fills with good things.

From now on, whenever I read this psalm, I'll think about a situation our church faced a few months ago. It was under the radar, off the books. Most of you were unaware of this situation as it was happening, unaware of the challenges it raised and the blessings it gave to a handful of our congregants and to me.

It was a June afternoon. Robert and I were eating lunch together on our side porch, when all of a sudden I noticed Elke, walking on the sidewalk towards the manse. She was looking our direction, and looked distressed. Then I noticed that someone was with her: an Asian woman who appeared to be in her 40s or 50s. I stood up and walked to greet them, and as I got closer, I could tell that the woman was crying. Elke said, "I was walking past the church, and I saw this woman standing there, looking lost, and crying. She told me a little bit about what's wrong, but we're having a hard time communicating, so I thought I'd bring her to the church office and see if anyone else could help."

Now, in seminary, they teach you that when you're providing care for someone who is feeling especially anxious, one of the most important things you can do is just be a non-anxious presence. Even as you empathize with someone, as you try to understand and draw near to their pain, you don't need to take on their pain as your own. You don't need to mirror their distress. Instead, try to be a presence of peace in the midst of their chaos. And that's what I tried to be for this woman. In a calm and caring tone, I said "Hi" and introduced myself, offered a handshake, and I told her that Elke and I wanted to help her however we could. Then I asked her what her name was, and through her tears, she said, "I can't tell you." Not sure what to make of that, I said, "Well, how about I just call you 'Ma'am,' then?" And for the next couple of months, that's what I and several other church members called her.

When I invited Elke and this woman into the office, I expected that she was in need of food, or housing, or transportation, or something else that could be provided fairly easily. The Good Neighbor Guild, as many of you know, allows our church to give vouchers to people in need, either for groceries at a nearby store or for a few nights of lodging at a nearby motel. I figured

that we'd listen to this woman share about her struggles for 10 to 15 minutes, give her one or two of these vouchers, and then move on. But that's not what God had planned for Ma'am or for us.

Elke and I spoke with her for no less than an hour, during which we heard a story that left us with more questions than answers. The woman began by saying that she had a friend from New York City who was in serious danger. And this was, primarily, why she was crying. In recent years, this friend had been helping her find temporary employment and housing in the city—mostly caring for pets and cleaning houses, in exchange for a bed and some cash. But now, Ma'am told us, things had changed. Her friend had to flee the city and had to be extremely careful about connecting with her. According to Ma'am, all of this was because of her friend's mother-in-law, who was a very powerful, very dangerous woman, who did not like Ma'am, and who did not want her daughter-in-law helping Ma'am. The mother-in-law's name could not be mentioned, because she has connections at the top of the CIA, and if any of this got back to her, Ma'am told us, she would be in even more danger.

During that conversation, we learned that Ma'am was currently living and working nearby, caring for some animals. This was the last job that her friend had arranged for her before fleeing the city. We learned that one of her bosses was sexually harassing her, and Ma'am was hoping to find a way out of this living situation. But until she got another lead from her friend, she had nowhere else to go. That first day, in the office, we didn't learn much more than that. Although she was very scared and upset, she was also very glad to get a load off of her chest, to know that there were people she could turn to who wouldn't try to take advantage of her. And because she could tell that we were safe people and that our church was a safe place, she asked if there was someone in our church who could take her in, who she could work for—or perhaps she could simply sleep in the office for a while. This, we knew, was not an option. *How about shelters in the area?* I asked. *We can connect you with various shelters.* No, she said. She had a laptop, and that was her only way of connecting with her friend, and people are always stealing at shelters, she said. Calling the police, we quickly learned, was also not an option, so far as she was concerned. *Mother-in-law has paid off the police before!* she insisted. So, we wanted to help, but we didn't know how. The whole thing was sad, frustrating, and unsettling.

And it only got more so. For the next couple of months, Ma'am came by the office a couple of times a week, for half an hour to several hours each time. Some days, she just sat in our office, used the wi-fi, and enjoyed the peace and quiet. Other days, Donna Valeri or I would sit and talk with her a bit, trying to get more information out of her and brainstorm solutions. On one of these days, she showed me an e-mail that she had just received, supposedly from an undercover agent who was helping her and her friend from New York City. And once I saw this e-mail, everything started to make sense. It was from some bizarre address, like jothesecretagent@verizon.net. To a non-native English speaker, the e-mail could easily look formal and serious, but to my eyes, it was obviously bogus. It seemed like the e-mail's sole intent was to instill fear in its reader, to keep her from talking to people or seeking help. The idea had already entered our minds, when we started to realize how many of Ma'am's previous jobs had involved sexual harassment and even abuse. Now, it seemed more or less certain to us: this

woman was a victim of human trafficking. Her friend, the mother-in-law, all of these details that she had told us, and that she herself had been told, and had believed, they were part of an intricate ploy to keep this woman within their ring and to keep her from looking for a way out—indeed, to keep her from even realizing that she was being trafficked!

Eventually, with the help of Pat Andrus and Donna Valeri, we got Ma'am into a local motel. Pat often provided her with transportation, taking her to buy groceries and to do a few other fun things. Pat also invited her to our Strawberry Festival and to a Sunday service, both of which she attended and greatly appreciated. Once we started introducing her to other people, we began calling her "Annie"—a name that she seemed to really like. Eventually, we connected Annie with an organization called Dreamcatchers, which works with survivors of human trafficking who are undocumented. Together, Annie and I met with a representative of this organization, and eventually, she agreed to go with them to a safe house. We haven't seen her since then, but we've received word that she's doing well.

There were times when we felt way in over our head with Annie. And we were. There were also times when we—or at least when I—felt frustrated, when Annie seemed difficult or unreasonable or ungrateful—easy accusations to throw around when you yourself have secure housing, food, and employment, and don't know what it's like to be in their place. Helping Annie was never easy and never glamorous. Nor was it ever entirely safe. But looking back, God was so clearly present and at work every step of the way.

I invite you, friends, to listen to our second reading once more, this time with Annie in your mind and heart. "O give thanks to the LORD, for the LORD is good; God's steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, those God redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south. Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to an inhabited town; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and God delivered them from their distress; God led them by a straight way, until they reached an inhabited town. Let them thank the LORD for this steadfast love, for God's wonderful works to humankind. For God satisfies the thirsty, and the hungry God fills with good things."

And in closing, friends, hear these words from Teresa of Avila: Christ has no body but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks Compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Amen.