

**The God Who Runs**  
**2021 First Responders Appreciation Sunday**  
Pastor Lester Zimmerman  
June 6, 2021

Good morning! It is good to reconnect with you in this way this morning. Erma and I have been out ministering in other churches but there is no place like home. Pastor Brian and his team have been doing a great job leading the church. Erma and I are blessed seeing the church growing and moving forward. Great job Pastors Brian and Tracy and team.

Quick update on Erma. She has completed her cancer radiation treatments and is responding well to the medication she is on. She is doing well other than some fatigue. Thank you so much for your prayers and cards. Please keep praying for complete healing.

Today is First Responders Sunday. We have set this day aside to honor and say thank you to our first responders who serve us and help keep our communities safe.

After you have experienced their help, like Erma and I both have, you appreciate them all the more and are grateful they are constantly on standby for our community. We all owe a debt of gratitude to these men and women.

We not only honor First Responders today but also their spouses and families who sacrifice and support their first responder. This year we also want to honor doctors, nurses, aids, and those who serve in nursing homes and senior care during this very difficult past year.

We thank you and we honor you today. If you serve in any of these categories or are a family member of one of these, please stand at this time and allow us to recognize and show honor and appreciation to you.

Thank you for coming this morning. We continue to pray for you and support you.

I also want to say thank you to businesses that allow their workers to volunteer and respond to fire and other emergencies. They also help pay the price in keeping our communities safe.

Thank you to those who brought emergency vehicles and equipment today. It is a great way to connect with the community. It is also a great way to recruit more volunteers and stir "the call" in people to serve as a first responder someday. We have a large group of first responders who attend here at Petra for which we are thankful.

There will be a pizza lunch under the tent in the parking area after the 11 a.m. service for First Responders and their families.

There are also tables in the Atrium with some give away things for children from "Alert All," a local business thanks to Jon Boyd.

After the service everyone is invited to visit the First Responder vehicles in the upper parking area.

## First Responder Video

When we meet someone for the first time and find out they are a firefighter or EMT we sometimes ask, “who do you run with”? What we mean is, which fire company or ambulance group are they working with.

We use the term “run” because it describes what they do. When the call comes in, they spring into action. Time is of the essence. Lives may be at stake. They run as quickly and safely as they can to where the crisis is.

Emergency vehicles now have the ability to turn the traffic lights green so they can run faster and safer. I understand when I was taken to the hospital, several years ago with my heart attack, that we made it in record time. I was glad my driver knew how to run and get me there quickly!

In some places two story firehouses still use fire poles to quickly get firefighters down to the engines. Every second counts.

Why do first responders run? Why do police and first responders put their lives on the line? It is a calling that drives them. A calling birthed out of a passion to help people like you and me. That is why they run.

Several weeks ago, my granddaughters were riding their bikes on our driveway, and I was inside the house. Suddenly one of them began screaming and the other one comes running in saying the other one was hurt. – Guess what? I didn’t slowly walk out to see what was going on and stop and get a drink on the way. No, I ran as fast as these 66-year-old legs could take me. Her ankle was pinched in the bike and she needed help and papa came to her rescue.

Unlike their mother I haven’t learned to decipher their screams yet.

- Happy scream – scream for no reason.
- Mad at sister scream.
- There is a bug on me scream.
- I see a little blood scream.
- Arm is broken scream.

They all sound the same to me, so I run.

Let me tell you a story of another person who ran. We find the story in **Luke 15:11-32**.

**<sup>11</sup> To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So, his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.**

**<sup>13</sup> “A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. <sup>14</sup> About the time his money ran out, a great**

famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. <sup>15</sup> He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup> The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> “When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, <sup>19</sup> and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.”’

<sup>20</sup> “So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’

<sup>22</sup> “But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. <sup>23</sup> And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, <sup>24</sup> for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So, the party began.

This story is basically about two people. The Wayward Prodigal Son and the Forgiving Father. Jesus told the story because it is a story about each of us and a God who loves us. It is your story and my story. The details may be different, but we are all like the son at some point in our lives. THE BIBLE SAYS....

### **1. We have all gotten off the path and strayed from God.**

It is the condition of humanity. We call it being lost. Separated from God.

**Isaiah 53:6 All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God’s paths to follow our own.**

The son decides he can do life better without his father. He didn’t want to live by his father’s rules. He wanted to enjoy his sinful desires. He didn’t want his father telling him how to live. So, he collects his inheritance money and jumps on his donkey and takes off for a more exciting place.

As long as he had money to spend, he had plenty of friends but there came a day when the money ran out and his friends deserted him. What he thought would bring him happiness brought him misery and emptiness.

- At first his pride kept him from returning home to his father but after a while he came to his senses and decided to go home.
- He had rejected his father and wasted his inheritance but maybe his father would hire him to work as a servant. At least he would have something to eat.

Now the story switches to the father who represents God in this story.

The Father always had his wayward son on his mind, hoping one day he would return. He loved him with an unconditional love. No matter what his son did or how far he strayed the father was ready to forgive him and make him part of the family again. He could only wait for that day. It would have to be his son's choice.

## **2. The Father waits for us with an unconditional love.**

Notice, Jesus says the father saw him coming while he was still a long way off. The father probably got up every day and scanned the path down through the valley to see if there was any sign of his son. Maybe today would be the day. Then one day far off in the distance he spots his wayward son coming home.

He doesn't prepare a rebuke or send a servant to intercept him. He doesn't tell him to clean up first and then come and meet him. NO! What does the father do? HE RUNS!

Like first responders running to someone in trouble. The father runs full speed toward his son. His son was in trouble. Sin had pretty much destroyed him. He was starving. He was broken. He was a mess, but he loved him.

At the first sign of his son's decision to return home the father runs toward him. In the same way..... When our hearts turn toward God.

## **3. The Father runs toward us, pushing past our guilt, shame, and brokenness.**

Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.

I can imagine the son being filled with fear seeing his father running towards him.

- Was his father angry – Would he kick him off the property?
- Yell at him and beat him?
- Many people have this image of God with a big stick – waiting to punish.
- Feel they have sinned too much for God to ever forgive and love them.
- If he does, they think they will always be like a second-rate servant in the house - Never quite good enough.
- I can imagine the son throwing himself in the dirt at his feet – “I'm no longer worthy to be your son.”

But instead, the father picks him up and hugs him and kisses him. Smelly clothes and all. He doesn't let him finish his prepared speech of unworthiness. The father forgives him and calls for the servants to bring sandals, a robe and ring for him.

Slaves don't wear sandals and the robe and ring meant that his father restored him as a full son and no longer held his past against him.

That is how God treats us when we come to him. He forgives and restores us fully as sons and daughters.

**Conclusion:**

Sin has deceived all of us and separated us from the father's love. But God hasn't given up on any of us. He won't force us to respond but he waits. He watches down the road for us. Maybe today another son or daughter will decide to come home to the father's embrace.

We have a God who runs. He runs toward us. He is running toward you this morning. With arms of love and compassion. He welcomes you just as you are with all your sinful habits and hang ups.

**Romans 5:8 But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners.**

He has sandals, a robe, and ring for you. And the angels in heaven throw a party every time another son or daughter comes home to the father.

After the service we have prayer ministers that will be at the side of the sanctuary ready to pray with you and help you take hold of the hand Jesus extends to you in offering his forgiveness and salvation. We also gladly pray for any needs you might have.

- PRAY.....

Again, thank you to all the First Responders who are here and to those watching online. We do sincerely honor you today and every day. You are a blessing to our community.

**Blessing Prayer:**

Lord bless our first responders with your loving care. You know their needs, their joys, and their struggles. Let them know you are near and that you care.

Protect them physically from the dangers they encounter as they put their lives on the line. Grant them much wisdom.

Protect them spiritually, mentally, and emotionally from things they wish they could unsee and the trauma and danger they encounter.

Protect them and their families relationally from the added pressures and stresses they might feel.

In the midst of their serving give them times of laughter, times they can totally disconnect and have fun, times to be refreshed and renewed.

May you O Lord be their refuge and strength.