

"THE SAFETY NET"  
by Rom A. Pegram (3/26/17)

One of my early frustrations in ministry was the realization that I couldn't personally meet all the needs of all the people in the congregation. I just couldn't spread myself thin enough to be everybody's ... best friend ... prayer partner ... substitute parent ... or personal confidant. My sense of ineffectiveness in the lives of some was heightened when I had to deal with tough cases in the church, like *Prodigal Son (or Daughter) type scenarios*—a son or a daughter in the middle of blatant rebellion, running away from home and so forth. Or, *the individual who was willing to let his whole life fall apart*, marriage, family, career ... as long as they didn't have to deal with God anymore. There's the old saying that goes, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." That holds true for people, too, I've found out. *There are many who would let their lives go to pieces before they would admit their need for God ...* and that can be a heart-breaker!

But, even though such cases are troubling to me, what's most heartbreaking are the situations in the church *today* where people "fall through the cracks." Typically, these are the situations you never hear about until after the fact—those fringe families in the church who no one knows or reaches out to; when they finally leave the church, lonely and rejected, most in the congregation don't even notice ... or don't even care. They just ... fell through the cracks!

The fact is, even in our midst ... there are hurting and struggling people falling through the cracks. God's provision, or *safety net*, for these folks is the Church—those of us who make up the body of Christ. And that's one reason you're going to see a brand new ministry here at Trinity UMC called 'Connections' in the near future; the purpose of the 'Assimilation System' that they're going to be all about is to help shut the back door, so no one goes unnoticed, no one slips through the cracks here at Trinity—at least to the best of our ability. But *when the Church body doesn't function properly, people's problems are aggravated...*

It's kind of like a tightrope walker who loses his balance and plunges down into the *safety net* ... only to have the net rip. It ends up being kind of *a double tragedy!*

So, how should the Church function ... so that people's problems aren't invisible and then aggravated, but rather cared for? What difference should 'seeing the Unseen Christ' make here? Let's take a look at our scripture lesson for today and find out, shall we? Here's Paul teaching in his letter to the Romans (12:3-8, NLT); listen...

"Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us. <sup>4</sup> Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, <sup>5</sup> so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other. <sup>6</sup> In his grace, God has

given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. <sup>7</sup> If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. <sup>8</sup> If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly."

Folks, when the Church—as a *safety net*—is functioning as it should, this is what it should look like! As members of the Body, we will develop MINISTRY SENSITIVITY! We'll learn how to detect needs and aggressively move into action to meet those needs! But, is that normal?

D.L. Moody, that famous Chicago preacher once said, "A great many people have a false idea about the Church. They have the idea that the Church is a place to rest in. . . . To get into a nicely cushioned pew, and contribute to charities, listen to the minister, and do their share to keep the Church out of bankruptcy, is all they want. The idea of work for *them*—actual work in the Church—never enters their mind."

Moody made this observation over a hundred years ago, but *its application is remarkably fresh today!* How contemporary! I don't think it's a stretch to say that there are those in the Church today who still think it's a place to come and rest. As a matter of fact, I think some would be happy if we purchased our pews from Lazy-Boy! *Just let me come and relax, sing me some good songs, preach me a good sermon (with lots of funny stories), you can pass those plates if you want to (although I'm not entirely convinced I want to be a part of that ritual), and so forth.* Moody's words are incredibly haunting even today! This attitude still lingers, but what does Paul say in our scripture lesson for today? Would he agree with that? No. He'd probably say *the Church is NOT a place of rest!* So, folks, know this...

### **WE ALL HAVE AN IMPORTANT PART TO PLAY IN THIS BEING THE CHURCH!**

Ephesians 4:11 is a pastor's job description: Paul says God has given to the Church "some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be *pastors and teachers, [but the key to their role is verse 12:] ... to prepare [or equip] God's people [all of God's people] for works of service. . . .*" In other words, EVERY CHRISTIAN IS TO BE IN MINISTRY! The work of the Church—meeting the needs of the people—is the responsibility of *all* believers who're part of the Church!

Go back with me, if you would, to the *safety net* idea. A safety net, especially for tight-rope walkers, serves a very important purpose. If it's there, it can save lives. If it's not, life can be lost. If it *fails* to do what it's intended to do, for whatever reason, life can be lost ... forever. And, know this: *it only takes one strand in that net to make it weak enough to begin to fail.* EVERY SINGLE STRAND in that net *has* to be doing their part in order for the strength of the *safety net* to hold true!

The Church is the *safety net* for all in this world who are hurting, who are suffering from loss, and who are held captive in this life by many things! Their lives are dependent on the support and care and love that can *only* come from the Church—God’s hands & feet in this world! So, when the Church is functioning as it should—each person doing their part according to the measure of faith God has given them—then the body of Christ creates a *safety net* as it works together, protecting people from falling through the cracks...

So, serving others, or ministering to the needs of others around us (especially our fellow believers), is an activity ALL OF US must take part in ... and let me define ‘ALL’. The Church is made up of *disciples of Jesus Christ*—both *clergy* and *laity*! It’s a responsibility & privilege the Lord has given all of us... Are you excited yet? Or do you just feel like grumbling about now? If you do, Paul wants us to know this next...

**WE NEED TO REMEMBER TO DO OUR PART AND DO IT WITH A CHRIST-LIKE ATTITUDE!** First, know this from verse 6: "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us." That goes for ALL of us; there are no exceptions when it comes to God-given gifts. We all have ‘em; *you may just need to discover what yours are...* So, every Christian has the ability to serve others, which Paul reminds us of in vv. 6-8, then concludes by reminding us: *WHATEVER IT IS THAT YOU DO FOR THE BODY OF CHRIST, DO IT CHEERFULLY*! It matters *that* we get involved in ministry ... and it matters *how* we get involved in ministry! If you decide not to get involved or to serve with an un-Christ-like attitude (grumbling/complaining), it hurts the whole body—makes the *safety net* weak!

This is how Jesus intends for His Church to function, if you will. But, how can we make this kind of cooperation ... working together ... and doing it cheerfully ... a reality right here at Trinity UMC? I’m glad you asked ... because we also need to remember this...

**WE NEED TO DO ALL THAT WE DO AS IF UNTO CHRIST HIMSELF ... WHO IS HERE!** In Matthew 25:40, Jesus speaks of himself saying, "...‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’" Tell me, what difference do you think it would make in our attitudes if we remembered Jesus was right beside us, as well as being the recipient of our Christian service—whatever that is?

When my daughter, Rachel, was still in high school ... I remember one weekend that she had all of the female members of the youth group over for a sleep-over at the church in Belmont. They took over the whole basement for their overnight party! Just before Jane and I turned in, I remember Jane asking me to go over to the church, check on the girls and see if they needed anything BEFORE we went to sleep ... so, I did. I saw a sight I never in my life dreamt I would ever see! My very quiet, very reserved daughter ... was in the middle of dancing by herself in the midst of this crowd of girls ... to some music I’d never before! It was like she’d totally lost her senses—very

unlike the Rachel we knew! *Little did she know, but I was the personal recipient of some very crazy behavior!* So, I snuck in quietly. Folks, when the crowd of girls realized I was standing there, they all fell dead silent ... to the point Rachel soon knew something was up! She turned, realized her father—the pastor—was in the room ... and, man, did her behavior change!

In a similar way, if we begin to realize Jesus is present ... and that he will be *the personal recipient* of our every action, our lives are going to change, aren't they? One thing I'm most sure of is this: *Most of us would be more inclined to 'righteous behavior'—willing to get more involved in the lives of hurting people!* Wouldn't we?

Here's another positive outcome that I believe would happen: *Our homes would even change; they'd become more than just 'havens of rest!' They'd become ministry centers!* They'd be open to people needing special attention and care! Yes, our lives would change; we'd be more likely to respond quickly to those in need ... you know, without hesitation, without having to be coaxed or prodded... Can you imagine?

Folks, don't miss this—what I'm going to tell you now: *The truth is, Jesus does personally benefit when we reach out in service to the needs of others.* He told his followers (us), "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." If any of us had an opportunity to serve Jesus directly, we wouldn't *want* anybody else to do it for us, would we? Instead, we'd be jealously fighting for our chance to serve...

Once we get hold of this concept I'm talking about today—*doing what we do as if unto the Lord*, when we're given a real opportunity to catch one of His children who is 'falling through the cracks,' I'm convinced we'll be motivated to do just that! No longer will we be so *casual* about the pain and struggle in others' lives. We'll develop **ministry sensitivity**... And that's my message today in a nutshell: SENSITIVITY BEGETS SENSITIVITY: ***Becoming sensitive to Christ's presence in our lives also makes us sensitive to what Jesus cares about—namely those who are falling through the cracks!*** So, what about 'NEXT STEPS' in this area?

- Sometimes it can be as simple as introducing yourself to someone, "Hey, you're new here, aren't you? Why don't you come along and join us, sit with us, go to lunch with us, and let us introduce you to some others."
- Or it might be some simple words of affirmation like, "Thanks so much for faithfully serving in the choir week after week. You help to make my worship experience so much more meaningful."

Please understand that I'm not suggesting any exercise of merely warm, fuzzy phrases. I'm not suggesting you just throw around some 'Christian lingo' that floats out there with nowhere to go. Our service to others, sharing our God-given gifts, needs to land somewhere! "Let's get together *someday*" just doesn't cut it! "Someday" isn't a day of

the week; so, get into specifics with people. *We're talking "shoe leather" Christianity here! Remember Jesus words, folks: "Whatever you do for one of the least of these ..., you did for me."*

So ... enough talk. We are the Church. We are the Body of Christ, each with different but equally important gifts to share. It's time to be the Church, folks ... the *safety net*. There's many people falling out there ... and it's up to us to catch them. Let's do it ... and let's do it with a Christ-like attitude—*cheerfully*...