

# “Who Cares”

Romans 12 and Matthew 11:28-30

Sunday, November 19, 2017

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

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The call to live as a Christian is challenging. It's not easy to:

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering,  
persevere in prayer, and weep with those who weep.

So it's understandable that we can get weary. The gospel reading for today gives us encouragement.

Listen for God's word.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Thanks be to God for the words of Scripture.

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What type of person are you? It has been said that there are four types of people:

Those who are caregivers

Those who will be caregivers

Those who have been caregivers

Those who will need caregivers

Rosalynn Carter, wife of former president Jimmy Carter is credited with this four-person framework. It's a good framework, but our roles aren't permanent. As we journey through life, our roles change. At one point or another all of us will need to be cared for, to some degree. And at various points in our life's journey, we are called to be caregivers for others.

And caregiving is hard. It can be physically and emotionally exhaustive. It can be expensive. It can present challenging questions. It can put stress on families. Years ago, I heard about a book for families of people with Alzheimers Disease and at first the title seemed silly to me. It's called *The 36 Hour Day*. But the more I learned about the challenges of caring for someone with mental health issues, the more this title has made sense to me. Caregiving can be exhausting and feel never-ending.

As Christians we hear the call to be kind, patient, and caring. But let's be honest. Sometimes even the kindest, most patient person wants a little down time.

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Years ago, Erma Bombeck wrote about one day when she felt worn out, feeling like everyone was talking at her, with their petty complaints and frustrations. So when she arrived at the airport, she was looking forward to sitting down by herself, with her book. As she relaxed, alone with her thoughts, a voice next to her belonging to an elderly woman spoke up, saying:

"I'll bet it's cold in Chicago."

Bombeck answered rather brusquely, "It's likely."

"I haven't been to Chicago in nearly three years", she said. "My son lives there."

"That's nice", Bombeck said, staring at her book.

Then the elderly woman said, "My husband's body is on this plane. We've been married for fifty-three years. I don't drive, you know, and when he died a nun

drove me from the hospital. We aren't even Catholic. The funeral director let me come to the airport with him."

Bombeck wrote: "I don't think I have ever detested myself more than I did at that moment. Another human being was screaming to be heard and in desperation had turned to a cold stranger who was more interested in a novel than the real-life drama at her elbow. All she needed was a listener...no advice, wisdom, experience, money, assistance, expertise or even compassion...but just a minute or two to listen."

The elderly woman talked numbly and steadily until they boarded the plane, and each found her seat in another section. As Bombeck got settled, she her plaintive voice say to her seat companion, "I'll bet it's cold in Chicago."

Bombeck prayed, "Please, God, let that stranger listen."

*From "If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, Why Am I in the Pits?", published by McGraw-Hill*

This story invites us to be ready to listen, to be kind, to care. In order to be ready to care, we have to be healthy and strong. Caregivers need to care for themselves.

On airplanes, they tell you, in the event of an emergency, put your own mask on first, and then help anyone else in need. It sounds selfish, but it's smart. We need to take care of ourselves, so that we can take care of others.

Self-care takes a lot of different forms. We all have to figure out what we need. As Christians, we need to care for our spirits. This means we need to be rooted and grounded in God's love. We need to hear the gospel message over and over and over again, that God loves us, that God cares for us.

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Many years ago, when I was a young associate pastor, the church I served had a tradition of leading a worship service at a local nursing home on the fourth Sunday afternoon of every month. This particular nursing home was populated with people who had fairly serious physical and mental limitations.

All the residents who came to the service were in wheelchairs and it was challenging to communicate with anyone.

The worship service consisted of lots of singing and communion, along with a scripture reading, a three-minute sermon. We had a song book printed up, with lots of old favorites, like “In the Garden” and “The Old Rugged Cross.”

And there was one song that we sang almost every month that I had never heard before those nursing home services. The song is “God Will Take Care of You.”

When I first heard it, with all my theological sophistication from seminary, I thought it was kind of simple. The chorus says:

God will take care of you, through every day o’er all the way;  
He will take care of you; God will take care of you!

I even wondered about whether it was appropriate to have people with such poor health sing the song. But they loved to sing it. It was amazing to watch these people who seemed barely able to say a word as the song began. Their lips would move and they would start to sing the verses:

All you may need He will provide, Trust Him, and you will be satisfied,  
Lonely and sad, from friends apart, He will give peace to your aching heart,  
God will take care of you!

I realize now that they knew something that I've gradually started to learn. As my journey of faith has continued, I've come to greater appreciation that even though life doesn't always go as I want it to, God does take care of us, giving us peace and hope and abundant life. God is present with us in all circumstances.

I get a sense of that peace and hope in the reading from Matthew today. Jesus makes an invitation: "Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens."

This is a call for us to come to Jesus. When Presbyterians hear the words "come to Jesus" some of us get a little nervous, as sometimes Christian faith is manipulative and twisted.

But when we are able to open our hearts and trust God in Jesus Christ, in a healthy and genuine way, we discover this peace, this compassion, this love.

"Take my yoke" he says. The thing about a yoke is that it's for two animals to walk side by side, to work together. It's as if God in Jesus is saying, I will share the journey with you. I will be with you on the way and help you move forward.

It's still work, this journey, but we're not alone.

I think that as we realize that we find the strength, the compassion, the patience so that we can care for other people in need.

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I've been blessed to know some wonderfully caring and compassionate people over the years. There was an elderly couple in the church I served for ten years in Pittsburgh, and they both lived well into their nineties. Let's call them Bob and Nancy.

Nancy's health declined, and it was a long and challenging journey for Bob and their family. Near the end of Nancy's life, I went to visit her at the nursing home where she was. Bob didn't know I was coming. I entered their room to see him sitting at her bedside, holding her hand, stroking it gently, saying things like "It's going to be OK sweetie. Can I get you anything? God loves you. I love you. We'll be OK." She was barely conscious, but she had a smile on her face.

For decades, they had been in church together, hearing the good news of God's love, of God's care. And I believe that the message of the gospel had taken root in their hearts, giving them strength and to be caring, loving, and hopeful.

Thanks be to God.