

**“The Ministry of Balcony People”**

**Romans 15:1-7**

**Hebrews 12:1-2**

**Text: “Therefore encourage one another and build up each other...”**

**1 Thessalonians 5:11**

I'm going to ask you to do something strange. Would those who are able please stand up. If you are on the main floor, turn around and look up at those who are in the balcony. If you are in the balcony, please wave to the people downstairs. If you are on the main floor, please wave back. Now would the balcony people give a “thumbs up” to those below. Now would those on the main floor please return the favor. Now everyone may be seated.

Here's the answer to the question everyone is asking – “What was that all about?” Many years ago, I attended the Institute of Theology at Princeton Seminary. One of the lecturers was Carlisle Marney, a renowned Southern Baptist preacher from Charlotte, NC. I remember him so vividly because he was such a big man who sort of hung over the lectern and spoke with a deep, resonant voice, seasoned with a lively sense of humor.

I also remember a metaphor that he used in reference to people that are always there for us. He called them “balcony people.”

“Every human being is like a house,” he said. “There are different rooms in the house that is you. There is a parlor where you welcome guests. There is a kitchen in you – a place where you are nourished, a place where you are fed, a place of fellowship. There is a bedroom in you – a place of rest and perhaps a place of love. There is a basement where you store your trash. Now in my upbringing there would have been a balcony on the house. Being a southerner, I see a white wrought iron railing in front; I see rocking chairs sitting on it, some ladder back, some wicker rocking chairs; and I see people on the balcony drinking sweet tea or bourbon, depending on whether or not they were Baptists or Presbyterians.”

Recalling the passage from Hebrews in which the author writes that **“we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,”** Marney calls those witnesses “balcony people,” those who affirmed him and had a positive impact on his life. In the context of the scripture, the cloud of witnesses refers to those “saints” who have gone before us. The 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hebrews lists many of the characters who played an important role in our faith story – Abraham, Moses, David and many others.

If you think about it, we all have our own personal list of balcony people, some famous, most not famous at all. I can think of theologians and authors who have influenced me, Carlisle Marney is obvious one, as well as members of congregations I have served and aunts and uncles and parents and a whole host of folk who have influenced me for the good. The cloud of witnesses or balcony people don't have to refer only to those who have gone on before us. It can also refer to those who are with us and for us now, who stand by us and put their arms around us and care for us and show love for us.

A Google search reveals that Leo Buscaglia, a motivational speaker from not too many years ago

who was often seen on Public Television, also referred to balcony people. He defines them as “those who can see beyond the obstacles to guide you to the ‘open area.’ Those who encourage your dreams and aspirations.” You recognize them because they are positive, personal, supportive, encouraging, empathetic, edifying and JUST PLAIN THERE!<sup>i</sup>

Beware! There is also such a thing as “basement people” – those who for whatever reason seem always bent on discouraging you. They show little or no empathy for you and have no interest in listening to you or trying to understand you. If criticism is necessary, and sometimes it is, they criticize with malice while a balcony person would criticize with much love and only for the purpose of helping you to grow and move forward.

*Encouragement* is what balcony people are all about. As Christians, our calling is to be balcony people. The late William Barclay said, “We have a Christian duty to encourage one another. Many a time words of praise or thanks or appreciation or cheer have kept people on their feet. Blessed is the one who speaks such a word.”

Unfortunately, there are a lot of basement people in the faith community. Their words of discouragement easily pull others down. They are accusatory and judgmental. I think of the story of Job in the Hebrew scriptures. He was a man who suffered just about every calamity known to the human race. His so-called friends came to comfort him but ended up blaming Job for his suffering. Job would protest that he was innocent and did nothing to deserve his lot in life. They would unpack their dusty, but cherished, doctrines and argue, “Oh yes, you must have sinned terribly for all this to happen.”

At one point Job had heard enough and defended himself this way: “I’ve had all I can take of your talk. What a bunch of miserable comforters! Is there no end to your windbag speeches? What’s your problem that you go on and on like this? If you were in my shoes, I could talk just like you. I could put together a terrific harangue and really let you have it. But I’d never do that. I’d console and comfort, make things better, not worse!”<sup>ii</sup> Job had more of a mind and spirit to do for his friends what they refused to do for him.

A college professor writes,

I love to watch students come alive. One of the courses I teach is freshman English, and that’s a place where you can empower people. They often come to you beaten down. All anyone had done was tell them how bad they were in English. You try to encourage them to write about who they are, to talk about who they are, and you show some interest in them. You show them that they have something interesting in their lives. They’re people. Before I pass back their first graded paper, I give them a little speech: “This grade is not for you. This grade is for a piece of work you turned in.” Then I ask them if they want to know what I think of them, and usually they want to. So I continue, “I think you’re made in the image of God and of inestimable worth. There’s no way anything I could put in my grade book could ever begin to estimate you.” I learned to do this after I read Flannery O’Connor’s story about the boy who went up in the attic and drew a circle with a big “F” in the middle because he hadn’t been doing well in school, and hanged himself over the “F.” He didn’t distinguish between the grade he was getting and who he was. For me, the meaning of life is to share with people the

wonderful news that we are the daughters and sons of God.

Do you remember that poem by Dorothy Law Nolte, *Children Learn What They Live?* One of the lines reads - "If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.

A couple of years ago on a very warm Sunday in June, I had my bike in the van so I could leave right after worship and head downtown to catch some of the excitement of the annual USPro Championship bike race that goes from the Art Museum to Manyunk. Three things impressed me that day. 1) Most guys look better in spandex than I do! 2) The average speed of the race was more than twice my maximum speed. I felt very old!

3) What impressed me most was the crowd along the route. Every time a group of bikers went by, they were cheered along by applause and the ringing of cow bells. There were teams and there was a winner, but that didn't seem to matter. There's no way the spectators could have known who was going to pass by next, even if they had a favorite. No matter - they cheered anyway.

What a sport! Unlike an Eagles' or Phillies' game, I heard no cat-calls or boos. Only cheers. On the part of the bikers, it was all about reaching their personal best. On the part of the spectators, it was all about *encouraging* them. Literally, that word means to "put in courage." Nathaniel Hawthorne's thought is particularly appropriate: "As a general rule, Providence seldom gives to mortals any more than just that degree of encouragement which suffices to keep them at a reasonably full exertion of their powers." On that Sunday, Providence provided the bikers with more than just enough encouragement - they had their God-given strength and cheers from the crowd. No wonder they could exert such power and ride 156 miles in 90 degree heat, including 10 times up the "Manyunk Wall."

*Encouragement* is a ministry. One of the early apostles was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, named Joseph who, because of the way he lived his life, was renamed *Barnabas*, which means *son of encouragement*.<sup>iii</sup> According to Paul, there aren't many gifts of the Spirit that are more important than prophesy, and he talks in a surprising way about what prophesy means—**"speak[ing] to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation."**<sup>iv</sup>

Would that there were more cow-bells and applause for the human race! What a different world this would be if nations put in an occasional good word on behalf of other nations. How different our work places would be if we expressed more words of gratitude and appreciation to co-workers. How much more productive workers would be if their supervisors encouraged more and managed less. And in our homes? WOW! You can draw your own conclusions of what home life would be like if we did more upbuilding of one another rather than tearing each other down.

In case you have any doubts, make no mistake about this - God does not hang out in the basement. God isn't out to get us. God doesn't pull us down. God lifts us up. God hangs out in the balcony. Jesus came that we might have life, life in all its fullness.<sup>v</sup>

There are at least two places in the Bible that say why the Bible was written. One is in John's Gospel - **"These [words] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the**

**Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”<sup>vi</sup>** The other is in today’s reading from Romans: **“For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.”<sup>vii</sup>** There you have it, plain and simply. The Bible was written that we might have life in Christ and be so encouraged that we would never be without hope.

**“So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us?”<sup>viii</sup>** Encouragement – who of us does not need it? To encourage one another – who of us is not called to that ministry? Do you consider yourself to be a balcony person or a basement person? It would be physically impossible if everyone tried to sit in the balcony next Sunday, but metaphorically speaking, it would be a beautiful sight.

#### Endnotes

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- i. <http://www.fulllifeahead.org> Go to “Resources” and then “Three types of people”
  - ii. Job 16:1-5, *The Message*
  - iii. Acts 4:36
  - iv. 1 Corinthians 14:3
  - v. John 10:10
  - vi. John 20:31
  - vii. Romans 15:4
  - viii. Romans 8:31-32 (MsgB)