

Series: Witness of the Windows

Today: The People in Our Basements and the People on Our Balconies

Window #7—The Pilgrim

Text: Hebrews 12:1-2

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

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First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

INTRODUCTION

This morning we continue our series on these wonderful stained glass windows which surround us every time we gather in this sacred space. Today our focus is on The Pilgrim Window. It is the window which is this one on my right (your left) over the chancel entrance to the Sanctuary. It is the first of three windows by Nicola D'Ascenzo. It was installed in 1937, and it is the only window by D'Ascenzo that is in the sanctuary. The other two are in the Narthex and in the Christian Education wing. It was the generous gift of a bequest by Susan Carpenter Frazer in memory of her parents, Reah and Abiann Steel Frazer.

It shows the figure of a pilgrim on life's rocky road looking toward the cross which is being borne by an angel. It represents the promise of salvation for all humankind. The shield at the top and the letters Alpha and Omega at the sides are there to symbolize the sustaining power of faith. The inspiration for the window is our text for the morning, and I invite you to listen for the word of God as it is found in Hebrews 12:1-2:

¹ *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,*
² *fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

MESSAGE

The phone rang shortly before noon. I was rushing to get through some last minute details so I could make a luncheon date, but there was urgency to the voice on the other end of the phone which snatched me from my routine and forced me to become attentive to her needs. *“I wonder if you could stop by some time.”* Her voice was choked and her tone was nasal. She either had a bad cold, or she had been crying. Just a few weeks before we had lived through the nightmare of the sudden infant death of her son, and I knew these were difficult days. I cancelled my lunch date and went right over.

When I arrived, it was clear that my assessment of her condition was correct. Her eyes were red and puffy. She greeted me with a wad of tissues in her hand. We chatted for a few moments, and then she led me to the basement door. We went down the stairs together, and she took me to a cold, dark, damp basement where she had set up two chairs in front of a trunk filled with memories of her first husband.

I had known of her previous marriage. We had talked openly of his death in Vietnam. She spoke with candor about the loss she felt when confronted with her husband’s death, but what I did not know was why we were sitting in front of a trunk filled with his things. Ever so gently she opened the lid of the trunk. Then, speaking as if she was introducing me to an old friend, she began to unpack the trunk and explain piece by painful piece the artifacts of their relationship.

My head was spinning with confusion. I knew the death of her son was my reason for being present that afternoon. I also knew she was deeply in love with the man to whom she was now married. Why were we going through the trunk of another man whom she had loved?

As the story of her relationship continued to unfold, it became clear to her and to me that there was much which had been left unresolved in the grief she felt over her first husband’s death. Confronted with death once again, she was being forced to resolve not only the death of her child, but the death of

her first husband, as well. Her feelings of pain were compounded. All she knew was that she hurt, and her pain was twice as bad as her current husband's because she had lost someone she loved for a second time. Before I left that day, we knew we would have to get her the help she needed so she could get "unstuck" and move on to live in the present.

The imagery of that early spring afternoon in a dark, damp basement has stayed with me for more than 39 years. The drama that unfolded there was powerful for me not only because of her grief, but I think that the power of the basement image and all the unresolved issues of life are pretty much a universal experience for most of us.

I thought of it just a few weeks ago when I was trying to get us off to the beach for our annual vacation in Avalon. To fully understand it, you have to realize that we have been doing some painting in our home recently, and the basement has become a depository for partially filled paint cans. Added to this are the heavy rains we have experienced which brought some water to the basement, and what was once fairly organized has become a mine field of this and that so that to make it through the basement is like running an obstacle course.

Needless to say, I wasn't smart enough this particular morning to turn on enough lights so I could make a safe journey through my self-imposed obstacle course. So, as you might guess, I tripped over a piece of luggage that hadn't been put away, and I banged my foot on two cans of paint. After I had used some words that are not worthy of a pastor, my initial anger subsided, and I had to laugh at myself: "How much like life," I thought. How often do I meet people who are wandering around in the basement of their emotional lives, tripping over things which they have shoved down deep inside and failed to do anything bring order to the chaos of their lives.

Our text this morning was written as a word of encouragement to Jewish people who were believers in the saving love of Jesus Christ; those who believed that the Messiah had come in the person

of Jesus Christ. However, if he was the Messiah, his reign was not immediately identifiable. To follow Christ now meant persecution. They might be tempted to think that God had forgotten them just like the Jews who were following Moses in the wilderness. As a nation, they were once again under the occupation of a foreign power. As individuals, they were facing torture and death.

So the writer of Hebrews reminds them of the long heritage they have of God demonstrating God's faithfulness in difficult times. He reminds them of the stories of their faith from the very beginning of creation in the story of Cain and Abel. He lists the heroes of the faith: Noah, Abraham, Moses. He reminds them that God always provided them with the leaders they needed: Gideon, Barak, Samson. All of them remained faithful even when they were not able to receive what they had hoped for.

Then he gives the image of the balcony, this great cloud of witnesses, who are still cheering for them and encouraging them to lay aside every weight and sin which still trips them up and holds them back. He encourages them to run with perseverance the race set before them looking to Jesus who is the beginning and the end, the alpha and the omega, the full expression of God with us.

What a word of encouragement for anyone going through a difficult moment in their lives? To whom do we listen when we are going through difficult moments in our lives; the people in our basement or the people on our balcony? Let me tell you something about what I have learned in my own life through years of attempting to be faithful.

Down in my basement is a 13 year old smart aleck kid who would tease me unmercifully about being overweight and not as coordinated as the rest of the gang. To him I am a scapegoat. I am ugly and different, and he takes pride in making me question whether or not I really belong in anyone's group of friends. There is a sixth grade art teacher who lives in my basement, too. She reminds me regularly that there is a right way and a wrong way to be artistic, to appreciate art, and that mine is the wrong way. There are the early experiences with a father who was a perfectionist. With him, if I didn't live up to his

standards of perfection, if I made a mistake, I would be asked to leave while he would try to fix the mess I had made.

Down in my basement there is an awkward adolescent with a poor self image, and shyness around the opposite sex. He is easier to live with now because he has been loved so wonderfully for 42 years by the finest woman I know. However, if I were to lose her that chubby, awkward kid would love nothing more than to kick up his heels and romp around once again.

Those are just a few people in my basement. Have you been able to name who is in yours? Perhaps it is a dead spouse like the one in my friend's basement. Perhaps it is the experience of losing a job and being unable to find another one. Perhaps it is a parent who, in their own insecurities, made you feel unacceptable unless you were perfect.

The problem with the people in our basements is not that they are there. The problem is that we tend to listen to them too much. We tend to give them more space in our heads than they deserve. They are so familiar to us. Mistaking familiarity with comfort, we allow them to set the agenda for our lives.

So all too often you and I and those we meet are left stumbling around in the cold, dark, damp emotional basement of our lives. We don't want to be there, but we are fearful of leaving. So we take on behaviors to protect us from being hurt, and the dissonance it creates can be seen in behaviors which no one likes to be around—the demanding person who must always have everything his way; the perpetually sad person whom we can never cheer up no matter how hard we try; the perfectionist who is never satisfied with his own achievements nor the achievements of others because it could always be done better; the addict who tries to escape his loneliness by working too much or drinking too much; the overly dependent person afraid of taking responsibility for their decisions who become paralyzed to move forward.

But praise God! There is hope. Basement people are not the totality of our existence. God does not allow us to know only the negative or dwell in the basement forever. Instead, he provides us with the Church—the balcony people in our lives.

Balcony people are the people in our lives who not only accept us for who we are, but they ask us gently and persuasively to be all that we can be. They are the ones whom God uses to free us from the darkness of our lives and become all that God intends us to be in the light of God's grace. Hopefully we find them in this church, but it is not limited to First Presbyterian Church. Balcony people are the men and women of faith who are liberating and empowering each other to be freed from the constraints of cultural expectations, freed from the labels of race or class or educational background; freed from the negative experiences which tend to shape our lives into less than what we would like them to be and less than what God created us to be.

Balcony people are the people who help us to see ourselves as a person created in the image of God with a purpose and a potential we have yet to tap and abilities which we have yet to use to the glory of God. And the best part about this Church, these balcony people who are gifts of God to us, is that they are a cumulative lot. Once they are on the balcony, they cannot leave. They are constantly present to us, calling us to leave the basements of our lives. Whenever we pray, they pray with us. Whenever we face the unknown or the frightening, they are there to encourage us.

I count myself a lucky man. God has blessed me with an ever increasing number of balcony people. Let me tell you about just a few. Lou Evans and Walt James were my first balcony people. They watched with me as my family disintegrated, and when it became necessary, they stepped in to become my surrogate fathers. Like the good daddies that they were, they did not cling too tight. Eventually they helped me see that I had a much greater family in the balcony people I would meet along the way; that I didn't need to dwell on the nuclear family I was losing.

My best friend in college and my roommate in seminary, Scott Sullender, is one of my balcony people. He saw me as a lonely college student in need of a friend, and he became that friend. He supported me through the times I wanted to quit. He became more than a friend. He is my brother.

My wife, Cherie, has been my most intimate balcony person. She knows me better than anyone else. She has seen the worst in me, and she has seen the best in me. She lifts up the best in me, and with a breath of comfort, she accepts the worst in me and encourages me to rid myself of the bad habits and negative expressions that do not reflect the grace of God.

My list is so long, and I would like you to know them all, but there just isn't time. It includes people like Ralph Osborne and Bruce Larson who were just two of the men who were models of ministry for me. It includes Judy Mazza, a Sister of St. Joseph who worked with me as a chaplain, and Helen Losada, the chair of the first Christian Education committee I ever had to staff. And it includes many of you who have allowed me the privilege of being your pastor for the last 16 years. It includes everyone in my life who calls me to leave the basement people who want me to believe I am not good enough and reminds me that I am a man born in the image and likeness of God, who is saved by the grace of my Lord, Jesus Christ, and that makes me good enough.

Who are your balcony people? Have you identified them while I have been talking? Who is it, in the words of our scripture, that is cheering for you from the grandstands to leave your basement existence and live in the image God created you to be? If you have identified who those people are, then I have more good news for you. If you share a commitment of faith which places you in the church of Jesus Christ, then you had better expand your balcony because you have over 5,000 years of balcony people who are cheering just for you. Abraham is up there, and so is Moses. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Malachi are there right next to David and Samuel and Solomon, and they are cheering just for you. Peter and Paul, Sarah and Ruth, Rahab and Mary—all of them are on the balcony cheering for you!

And at the very head of all the people in the balcony, do you know who is standing there cheering for us? It is Jesus Christ himself. He is the one who affirms our uniqueness. He is the one who paid the price for all that separates us from God. He is the one who shouts for us to leave the basement and set forth on the particular race that God has called us to run with the particular skills that God has given us to use.

People of God known as First Presbyterian Church, we have been called to be balcony people for each other, and what a grand and glorious company that puts us in. Let us do everything in our power to be there for each other.