

“Balcony People”

Romans 1:8-17 and Hebrews 12:1-2

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The balcony of the church that I served in New Providence, New Jersey goes all the way around 3 sides of the sanctuary. There was an unwritten law that the Junior High School Kids sat without their parents in the left hand balcony and the High School Kids sat without their parents in the right hand balcony. During the Summer Olympics Games one year, the congregation watched on television as the judges **posted their scores** after a performance in the gymnastics competition... 9.1, 9.2, 9.3. The next Sunday right after the sermon we were singing the final hymn and I noticed a stir in the congregation and people were giggling and laughing! I looked up in the Balcony and a Sr. High kid **held up a sign right after the sermon that read 9.8, another 9.9 and another 10.0!** I felt pretty good about this evaluation of my sermon... until I remembered that these kids were all seniors in High School and they had all asked me to write college recommendations for them! Then, I looked up and one of the Sr. High Advisors held up a sign... 2.4. We excommunicated him from the rolls of the church!

The late author and theologian, Carlisle Marney employs the metaphor of a balcony to make a profound theological point. Deep inside every human being, Marney says, is the craving to be appreciated...the desire to be blessed! God puts people in our lives Marney says, who bless us, encourage us, and call forth gifts that we did not even know that we had inside us. Marney gives such people the unforgettable name, **Balcony People!** Balcony People are different from “Basement People” who are critical of us and drag us down into the basement of discouragement and despair. In contrast, Balcony People sit in the balcony of our lives and inspire us to be and to do our best!

This is one of those Sundays when I wish that I could take a walk with each of you around the beautiful grounds of the Church of the Palms or on a beach here in Sarasota and ask you the question, **“who has been a Balcony Person in your life?”** Think of the teachers, coaches, professors, supervisors, neighbors, parents, grandparents and special friends who have been Balcony People throughout our lives and who have enabled us to be the people we are today. Just think of the cloud of witnesses in each one of our balconies who helped us to be our very best! One of the wonderful

things about becoming a follower of Jesus Christ is that God enlarges our balcony. Do you know that the Apostle Paul, who wrote our scripture text for today from Romans, is sitting in our balcony? Abraham and Sarah are sitting in our balcony. Moses, Gideon, Rahab and Samson are all in our Balcony. They are sitting in the balcony of our lives cheering us on and challenging us to take risky steps of faith like they did!

Our “Balcony Person,” the Apostle Paul, reminds us in Romans 1:16 that he is not ashamed of the gospel because it is the Good News of salvation for every one of us! Paul’s theology in Romans teaches us that salvation is a gift of grace. It is a gift of God’s unmerited, undeserved favor. The stole that I am wearing around my neck this morning is a vivid reminder of the theological doctrine of justification by grace through faith that Paul is referring to in this text from Romans. One of the pastors with whom I work in Macedonian Ministry gave it to me. This pastor asked the children in his church the week before Father’s Day to go home and pick out the ugliest tie in their Daddy’s closet and bring it to church the next Sunday on Father’s Day. The kids did just that! (I must tell you that some of these ties are **REALLY UGLY** and you know what is sad about this... I own most of these ugly ties myself!) Then, the pastor asked the women in his church, who were gifted with a needle and thread, to take these ugly ties and weave these them into a stole for him. Many of you commented to me (before worship this morning) on the beautiful colors in this stole.) When the women of the church completed the stole, my pastor friend gave a children’s sermon and made this point ...God can take the ugliness of our lives and make something beautiful out of it. God can take the sin in our lives and transform it into something beautiful! The **GOOD NEWS** of the gospel is that God is a redeemer who brings resurrection out of crucifixion! Paul is calling to us from our balcony reminding us not to be ashamed of that good news and to proclaim it with our lips and our lives!

In addition to thinking about all of the people in our balcony, I’d love to ask you, **“In whose balcony are we sitting?” It’s an important question.** I’ll bet that many of us have never thought of ourselves as balcony people. But every one of us has a sphere of influence and it is in that sphere of influence in our families, on boards, in our business lives and in our neighborhoods that God calls **us** to be balcony people, too.

It is an inestimable privilege to be a balcony person. Our scripture this morning from Hebrews 12 lists three characteristics of Balcony People. These three qualities describe a maturing Christian. I challenge you to remember these three characteristics of balcony people and apply them to our lives in such a way that we will not be ashamed of the gospel but willing and eager to proclaim it each day in the way we live!

3 Characteristics of Balcony People

1. Lay Aside Every Weight and Sin that Clings So Closely

On our walk I would love to ask you, **“Is there something in your life right now that is weighing us down or holding us back from being who God wants us to be?”** You know what I mean. Anxiety? Worry? Fear? Resentment? Bitterness? Anger? Guilt? What is weighing you down? Is there any one here who wishes you could go back to a point in your life and do it over again?

God is asking us to lay aside every weight and sin that is clinging so closely...to face everything in our lives that is weighing us down and holding us back and when we do, that is when we can be free to be a Balcony Person for the people of our lives! Every one of us needs to let go of the things that are weighing us down so that we are free to be Balcony People who can encourage people or offer loving critique without an edge!

My friend George McCausland felt like he was carrying the weight of the whole world on his shoulders as he was the Managing Director of a YMCA in Pittsburgh, PA. He had a heart attack at the age of 48 and the Doctor told him that the stress of his job at the YMCA was weighing him down. George felt like everything was on his shoulders! The doctor told him directly that he wouldn't live more than a year if he didn't change his daily and weekly routine. So, when George was released from the hospital he was sitting on his back porch contemplating the Doctor's sobering words. He decided to write a letter to God... **Dr. God...I hereby resign as General Manager of the Universe. Love, George! And, George told me, “Wonder of wonders God accepted my resignation!”** Is there anybody here this morning who needs to resign as General Manager of the Universe? You feel like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders. You feel like everything is depending on **you!** If we are to be Balcony people who bless and encourage others and who can say tough words to others without an edge, we must face the things within us that are holding us back! **We must lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely!**

2. Run With Perseverance the Race that is Set Before us!

God has a race for every one of us to run right where we are; in our jobs, our schools, our neighborhoods, and our families. But sometimes we compare our race to someone else's race and, if we are honest, we would rather run their race than our race! Their race looks more inviting than our race right now! What is the race that God is

calling you to run right now? Is it finishing a graduate degree? Is it being in a particularly challenging job right now? Is it parenting or grand parenting children in a difficult time in their life? Or, is it caring for an alcoholic in your family who has been to 30 meetings in 30 days and 60 meetings in 60 days? If you are running that race with an alcoholic, then you know how challenging that can be. Is it caring for an aging parent or spouse or a sibling with early signs of dementia or Alzheimer's? My cousin is running this race right now. His wife is in the early stages of Alzheimer's and if this is your race, God bless you, because it is one of the most challenging races to run. Is it being an elder on the Session? Is it forgiving someone? Is it leading an organization? Is it finding a new set of friends after a move?

This won't always be the race that God is calling you to run. The race will change as the circumstances of your life change. But God doesn't want us to miss running this particular race! God is calling us to be faithful in **this race** and then when this race is over, God has another race for us to run!

Tony Campolo is an internationally known author, speaker, Baptist Evangelist and a Professor of Sociology at Eastern University in Pennsylvania. Years ago, Tony was in such demand as a speaker that his wife Peggy thought it best if she became a "stay at home Mom" with their two children, Bart and Lisa. But, when Peggy compared herself to other women who were Lawyers, Doctors and Real Estate Agents and they asked her, "What do you do?" She would often reply, "I don't do anything, I am just a wife and a Mother." Tony asked her if she felt that her work of parenting wasn't important. She replied, "Tony I think that raising two children in this society is one of the most important jobs in the world, but when I compare my job with another woman's job, I just feel a little bit inferior." Tony said why don't you come up with something that will help people to realize just how important your job as a Mother is?

So the next time, Tony and Peggy were at a party and Tony heard someone ask Peggy in a rather condescending voice. Well my dear what is it that you do? Tony heard his wife say, "I am nurturing two homo-sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo - Christian Tradition, so that they might be instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia God envisioned from the beginning of time! And what do you do? "And the woman said, "Oh, I'm just a lawyer!"

Not everyone is called to be a stay at home mom. Not everyone is called to be a lawyer. Peggy Campolo had to run the race that was before her...with perseverance! God calls every one of us to run **with perseverance** the race that is set before **us!**

3. Looking to Jesus the Pioneer and the Perfecter of Your Faith

As Christians, we play to an audience of one. Our ultimate balcony person is Jesus Christ. God's opinion of us is the ONLY opinion that matters! There is only one person to whom we are ultimately accountable...Jesus.

In the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia, our USA Women's Gymnastics Team was in contention for a gold medal. Everything came down to the performance of young woman named, Kerri Shrug on the Vault. She had dislocated her ankle and wanted to quit. But she had to lay aside the anxiety and fear of hurting her ankle worse than ever, and she had to run with perseverance the race that was before her...the vault. She would rather have run another race. But, that was the race that was before her. As Kerri took her place at the end of the runway, with fear etched on her face, she looked to the sidelines and there her eyes met Bela Karoli the USA Women's Gymnastics Coach. Kerri realized that she needed a 9.5 to give the U.S. the gold medal. Her eyes were riveted on her coach as he yelled to her... **"Kerri... YOU CAN DO IT!!"** Inspired by her coaches words, Kerri ran down the runway as fast as she could go...and she hit the vault and jumped up and twisted her body in the air and came down on that ankle... and she **stuck** the landing...and it hurt!! Then the score flashed on the scoreboard... 9.6 and the USA won the Gold Medal!

Every one of us is called to be a Balcony Person, a Bela Karoli, in the life of someone else. We may not realize it ...but we are. Are we willing to claim that we are on the face of the earth to be Balcony People for our neighbors, our children and grand children, our friends, and colleagues? Just as our Balcony is full of people who have impacted us and called forth the gifts in us, so we are called to be Balcony People in the lives of others. But how do we do that? We do it by laying aside every weight and sin that cling so closely, we run with perseverance the race that is set before us... and we look to Jesus our Coach and Ultimate Balcony Person who is the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith.

Someday, when we enter the Kingdom of Heaven, our ultimate Balcony Person, Jesus, will evaluate our lives, but he will **not** hold up a sign saying...9.1, 9.2, 9.3! Thank God! Our scores would be very low. Instead, because we are saved by grace through faith, Jesus Christ will look at us through the grace of God and will say these 7 sublime words **"Well done, my good and faithful servant."** My dear friends in the Church of the Palms, these are the only words worth living for! A-men