

Watching Over Our Souls

Hebrews 13:17–21 (NRSV)

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you. **18** Pray for us; we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. **19** I urge you all the more to do this, so that I may be restored to you very soon. **20** Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, **21** make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Watchmen for the Soul.

In 1957 after three years of intensive planning, design, building and spending billions of dollars by our nation, the DEW Line was opened and remained in operation for the next 28 years. Our nation continued to spend millions to keep it operational and staffed. Despite the magnitude of this project and system, probably few know what it was.

DEW Line –Distant Early Warning Line – was a system of radar stations across northern Alaska, Canada, Faroe Islands, Iceland and Greenland. During the heart of the Cold War with the USSR, it served as a “watchman” for our nation and Canada to warn of the approach of Soviet Bombers or Missiles. The system was designed to protect us. Fortunately, no offensive assault was ever launched by our “adversary.”

What or who keeps watch over your soul? Apparently the author of Hebrews had this question in mind as he concluded his writing. He used the metaphor of a “watchman” who served as one who watched over human souls.

Who is there for you, not only to provide warning when missiles are launched toward your soul but also to provide care for your soul?

The movie, *Selma*, portrays the struggle blacks had in the deep South in clearing ridiculous hurdles in exercising their right to vote as citizens of our great nation. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a key leader in the movement. The movie portrays King as more than one who was concerned with civil rights, justice and politics. When people were being hurt, the movie showed that he hurt. You see, Martin Luther King, Jr. had the heart of a pastor and cared for the souls of those around him. (I encourage you to watch the movie and experience the sense of care he provided.)

I am under the conviction that all of us need others as “watchmen” for our souls. We need people who care about us and willing to reach out with love to address our weaknesses, wounds and distress as well as offer direction to spiritual health. Anytime we lack those persons in our lives, our souls are placed in greater jeopardy and are at risk of attack and failure. I guarantee that our enemy, the Devil, is not like the Soviet Union who never tested the resolve and defense of the USA. Our enemy will launch many assaults against your soul. Some of his weapons will land and you will have need for deep care.

As I look back in my own life, several people come to mind who have been watchmen and caregivers for my soul. For me, my father played a dual role of dad and pastor. As a PK, he was the only pastor I knew as a child and youth. I started pastoring as a college student, so he has been my “only” pastor. But through the years, I can name several DS’s and a couple of bishops who served the role of “watchman” and care giver for my soul – Bill Carter, Ann Blair, Wilmer Robbins, Al Bowles, Bishop Ray Chamberlain. Many contemporaries have played that role – Charles Maynard, Joe Green, Randy Martin, David Graves, Andy Ferguson, Stella Roberts, Ben Miller. I knew and know these cared for me and “had my back.” Who are those people who serve as watchmen and provide care for your soul?

Under Attack.

When the author of Hebrews used the metaphor of “watchman” for the soul, he clearly had in mind a group of people whose role was to provide this care. He used a broad word to identify these persons – “leaders.” In his understanding it was the job of spiritual leaders to watch over and care for the souls of others.

Now it is interesting that the author did not define who those leaders were/are. From the church vocabulary of that day and the particular roles in churches, he had the choice of many titles: pastor, elder, deacon, deaconess, bishop, apostle, teacher, and evangelist. It seems that this line of defense and care was part of the work of Christian leaders across the spectrum.

How are we to understand this idea as it relates to our age in this present context at OUMC? It seems that our “leaders” are tasked with watching over and caring for our soul include your pastors (Will and me), the staff, leaders of committees, of ministries and of small groups. All of these leaders have a role to play in this type of ministry. I see and hear in these “leaders” their passion and concern for you and your soul. These willingly stand in the gap for your well-being.

It is common for leaders in ministry here to come to me and express concern for someone in their circle of influence. These leaders care about those persons deeply and want to do what they can to provide care and to insure the people don’t step on landmines. Often the leaders are seeking guidance. They want me to join me in prayer for the others. At times they ask me to assist. There are people here watching out over your soul.

I want to shift gears and provide a more narrow focus and highlight a great need. I want to address the climate for pastors and church staff in our age. What I am about to say is not because there are some types of stirrings here or staff in peril but it is important to understand the pressures that exist.

While serving in ministry as a pastor or on a church staff is highly rewarding and fulfilling, it is also very challenging, stressful and disappointing. Most people I know and have known who serve in this capacity have love in the hearts for people and care about what happens to them. Yet most of us go through times of great challenge and distress.

If you will google, “*pastors leaving the ministry*,” you will find some heart wrenching stories and statistics. My vocation carries high risks in terms of tenure, family health, mental health and overall well-being. Around 40% of pastors do not serve for more than 5 years. Only a small percentage retires from ministry at a retirement age. Nearly all of us, have or will seriously consider dropping out of pastoral ministry. (I know what that is like and it “ain’t fun.”) Rates of anxiety and depression are higher among clergy than the general population. Most pastors feel ministry has had an adverse impact on their family.

According to many streams of research, pastors drop out of ministry because of disappointment in believing the church should go on and the people resist, **burnout from too many hours spent and no renewal, loneliness, anger and moral failures**. It is hard being a pastor and serving in ministry on a church staff.

Recently I had a conversation with a colleague who is in a tough place. He and his family had poured their lives and resources into ministry to win people to Christ and disciple them in a new church plant. He was extremely disappointed about the results and how that people would come and say they loved the church but never came again. The church just didn’t take root. My colleague was at a point of searching for what he should do next.

I share all this not to seek sympathy for pastors but to help you understand the consequence not only for pastors but also for the souls of people. You see, when pastors and church staff drop out, it has negative consequences on the church and people’s lives. It is like the DEW Line having a radar station to go out – risk to the soul becomes higher.

Guess what? This issue is not new to the Christian church. The ancient author of Hebrews urged his readers to take action so that the watchmen of their souls would serve with joy rather than a sigh. He went on to point out that when they serve with a “sigh,” it is detrimental both to the leaders and those under their care. No one wins when Christian leaders suffer defeat.

Watchmen of the your souls need care as well.

The Symbiotic Relationship - Mutualism.

In nature, many organisms live a symbiotic relationship – living “life with” each other. Essentially there are three types of these symbiotic relationships.

- **Parasitic** – you are familiar with this one on a personal basis. In the summer you are outside around dusk and mosquitoes begin feeding on your blood. The mosquito gets a good meal and flourishes. If you are lucky, you will only have an itchy whelp for a few days. If you are unlucky, the mosquito was carrying some kind of disease that could make you ill and possibly kill you. (In parasitic relationships, one organism benefits and the other is harmed.
- **Commensalism** – A spider climbs onto the limb of tree and begins to weave her web. The spider as a result is able to capture her next meal. The tree is unharmed and is no better off. In commensalism, one organism profits by the relationship, while the other is neither harmed or benefits.
- **Mutualism** – The honey bee flies onto a flower, collects nectar and pollen. The bee leaves pollen from its last stop and the plant is able to produce fruit. In a mutualistic relationship, both organisms benefit from the relationship.

Which type of relationship do you believe God desires we have with our spiritual leaders?

While pastors, church staff and church leaders have experienced all three types of relationship,

clearly the most healthy for all involved is mutualistic. I believe that as a person, that if those “leaders” – those who watch and care for my soul – are healthy and serve with joy, it will be more beneficial for each of us.

So what can we do to promote health and joy for the “watchmen” of our souls?

The Call.

It seems that the author of Hebrews had a clear plan about this as he recommended a threefold approach. I think it is worthwhile for us to consider, especially since I am numbered among the “leaders.”

“Obey your leaders” – To be honest with you, I do not like the sound of this instruction because it seems to promote in my mind, “Do what I say because I am the leader.” The words in Hebrews 13 are much friendlier. The word translated as “obey,” carries at its heart that of “trusting,” “following,” “being convinced by.”

Trusting and following our leaders does not mean that we always are in total agreement. There are times when we engaged in dialogue and debate. Yet we respect the person and their position. When we trust, we do not impugn the motives of our leaders and seek to understand from whence they are coming. If we suspect something is out of alignment with our leader, we go and talk with them in love.

Several years ago, the church I was serving faced a huge debt and one of leadership teams suggested we do something about paying it off. As a part of the strategy, I invited three of our trustees to join me in talking to a friend who was a stewardship consultant. One of the three accidentally copied me on an email he sent to a family member accusing me of a type of nepotistic behavior of seeking to hire my friend. Another of the trustees had a very different reaction. She came willingly to the meeting, listened intently and asked good questions. Following the meeting she thank me the encounter and said it had been very helpful.

“Submit to them” – Again the translation here are not my favorite given the use in our contemporary culture. The actual Greek word is used only here. It seems it has to do with showing respect to the position of the leader and accepting her/his authority. In our culture today, many seek to undermine the authority and position of others. This is especially tough to deal with in the midst of our spiritual journey.

“Pray for us” – As important as the first two I have mentioned, the final call is “pray for them.” This is the most important thing you can do for those who have been given the role of watching over your soul. Every leader needs to be covered in a blanket of prayer because we need God’s guidance and discernment in our lives. We make decisions routinely that can hinder or enhance the ministry of the Church and impact many lives. We need prayer because we face lots of stress and pressure and we need God’s help in dealing with them. We need prayer because we too face temptations that if we yield to them will be destruction on many.

This morning I am asking that you have a time of prayer for your pastors and staff. I have asked our Lay Leader to lead in that prayer.