

ROMANS 12:4-18  
MARK 2:1-12  
MATTHEW 5:1-12

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### ONE MINISTRY, MANY SETTINGS: IN THE CHURCH

Once upon a time, there was a FAMILY. There was a GRANDFATHER, his 2 sons & 1 daughter, their SPOUSES, and 12 grandchildren. They were a NICE family, who USUALLY got along and never seemed to have any major problems or crises. Oh, GRANDMA had died a few years before, at the early age of 60. That was ROUGH, but she had been a SEMI-INVALID for 12 years, so only GRANDPA was SURPRISED when she died. But NO family is IMMUNE to tragedy of course. And THIS family's tragedy DID come! One of Grandpa's SONS was a FIREMAN, and one day something TERRIBLE happened. He was fighting a FIRE from a HOOK and LADDER truck when his FOOT slipped and he fell to the ground. He SURVIVED, but spent WEEKS in the hospital. And when he went HOME, his INJURY wasn't fully HEALED. For MONTHS, he was PLAGUED with SEVERE headaches, even BLACK-OUTS. His doctors ASSURED him that they were doing ALL they COULD, but it wasn't ENOUGH! The PAIN was just UNBEARABLE! And as time passed, things only got WORSE. The man's HEADACHES became SO frequent and SO severe that his TEMPERMENT was affected. He would SAY things in ANGER that really UPSET people. Sometimes he even got VIOLENT. And THEN, those who had been trying to support them stopped COMING! Even the FAMILY pulled BACK, until ONLY Grandpa's OTHER son, the man's BROTHER, continued to VISIT. He was studying psychology in college and felt SURE that he could help, that he could somehow EASE his brother's PAIN. And he tried HARD, that's for sure. But nothing WORKED!

After awhile, ANOTHER problem began to PLAGUE the man: MONEY! He was running SHORT, and too PROUD to BEG from the town he had SERVED so faithfully. And there were no LAWS in those days to PROTECT him. Oh, the man's FAMILY chipped in a little, and SO did his WIFE'S, but none of THEM were well-off, so they didn't have much to GIVE! And the man felt like he had NOWHERE to turn. And the more he WORRIED, the WORSE his headaches got. And the WORSE his headaches got, the more frequently he blacked-OUT. And pretty soon, he began to DREAD even getting UP in the morning!

Well, ONE day during one of those AWFUL headaches, many MONTHS after his original ACCIDENT, the man considered the ONLY solution that made SENSE to him anymore: he would commit suicide. But then he thought: *NO, THAT would just leave ALL these problems to my poor WIFE. How will SHE support 5 children and provide them with the college education we WANT for them? It wouldn't be FAIR to leave HER with all those PROBLEMS. I guess I just have to take her WITH me. They're SURE to take care of the CHILDREN with BOTH of us gone. In fact, the KIDS will probably do better WITHOUT us!* Yes, THAT'S what the man's TWISTED logic TOLD him. SO, early one morning, he wrote a NOTE of explanation to his 5 children, ages 16 and under. THEN, he got the children off to school, loaded his SHOTGUN and went to the BEDROOM, where his pretty WIFE was still sleeping..... After SCHOOL that day, their 13 year-old SON found their BODIES in the bedroom.

It didn't take LONG for Grandpa's family to GATHER after the PHONE call. They were horrified and just SENSELESS with grief. And they SUPPORTED one another, and especially Grandpa, during those LONG, dreadful days of preparation and waiting, CALLING hours and funeral. And though they YEARNED for some support and help from others, they felt very

ALONE in their grieving. The 5 CHILDREN had been embraced by the WIFE'S family, but THAT family seemed to be BLAMING the man's family, so they hardly SPOKE. Very SAD!

However, just because GRANDPA'S family didn't have many PEOPLE around didn't mean that there weren't PEOPLE! Remember: this man was a FIREMAN and well-known in the community, even though HE didn't think so. Plus, his WIFE'S side of the family was VERY involved in a large CHURCH in town. And since GRANDPA'S family had NO church of their OWN, the funeral was at the WIFE'S church, a DOUBLE funeral. And the place was PACKED!

Well, it was a very STRANGE feeling for Grandpa's family to stand there, HUDDLED together for support, and feeling so CRUSHED and BROKEN, yet ALSO feeling so ALONE, while they could SEE that the WIFE'S family, and those 5 children, had literally THOUSANDS of people gathered around THEM, offering ALL kinds of love and support, strength and prayers. And it felt even MORE strange when Grandpa's family was standing next to the 2 CASKETS, and this loving, compassionate MINISTER came over to offer the WIFE'S family a very EMPATHETIC ministry, but barely SPOKE to GRANDPA'S family. They all agreed LATER that they'd never felt so AWKWARD, so ALONE, or so LONELY. And in the months and years to come, AS Grandpa's family watched that church EMBRACE, and CARE for, and MINISTER to those 5 children, and the wife's family, they REALIZED that by NOT having a church of their OWN, they had really MISSED OUT on something very PRECIOUS and LIFE-GIVING. They had really MISSED OUT on having an extended community with whom to WALK the journey of LIFE. They had really MISSED OUT on having "COMPANIONS" on the JOURNEY.

I LIKE that word "companion." It LITERALLY means "BREAD partner." And of course, bread IS the stuff of LIFE, isn't it? So, the CHILDREN, and the wife's FAMILY, had PARTNERS on the journey of life! They had PARTNERS in facing the STUFF of life, the JOYS and the struggles, the ups and the downs! They had PARTNERS to WEEP with them and HOLD them in the midst of their ANGUISH! They had PARTNERS to help them FEEL the love of GOD at WORK in their LIVES, bringing HEALING and hope and new life AMIDST all that AGONY and SORROW. Yes, they had BREAD partners, COMPANIONS on the journey! And THAT'S what GRANDPA'S family YEARNED for, ESPECIALLY as time went on.

You know, friends, when we talk about our MINISTRY in the church, underneath and undergirding EVERYTHING else that we DO, we're talking PRIMARILY about the call to be COMPANIONS on the journey. As St. PAUL says, WE are called to be a community where we *REJOICE with those who REJOICE, and WEEP with those who WEEP!* In other words, WE are called to break OPEN the bread of our lives -- the STUFF of our lives, the ups and downs of our lives -- and to SHARE it with each other, to SHARE it with our BREAD partners! You see: we ALL have TIMES when our FAITH feels WEAK! We ALL have times when we KNOW what it FEELS like to be poor in SPIRIT! We ALL have times when we MOURN, or when we HUNGER and THIRST for a RIGHT relationship with God! And WHEN these times COME, we NEED companions on the journey! We NEED people who will LIFT us UP -- like those in our Scripture Lesson from Mark lifted up that paralyzed man and CARRIED him to Jesus -- WE sometimes NEED people to carry US to Jesus, people who won't QUIT on us, EVEN if it means MAKING a pathway where there ISN'T one! And likewise, we NEED people willing to break OPEN the bread of their OWN lives and SHARE it with US -- people who will let us SEE their pain and sorrow, as well as HOW they've HEALED and HOW they've GROWN because of their FAITH. Yes, we need COMPANIONS on the journey. And THEN, when we go out and try to LIVE our faith, day after day, in our HOMES, our WORKPLACES, and the WIDER

community, we need people who will LISTEN to our tales of VICTORY and DEFEAT, people who will OFFER us encouragement and support, and people who will help us find HEALING and RENEWAL when we feel tired and beaten down, so that we can go out and do it all AGAIN the NEXT week. And whenever we stand up for JUSTICE or HELP our neighbors in NEED, we need people who will lend us COURAGE and STRENGTH, who will share their OWN stories of standing up for justice, and who will INSPIRE us to KEEP on WORKING for justice, even when it FEELS like we're getting NOTHING accomplished. Yes, we ALL need COMPANIONS on the journey, IF we are to LIVE our faith and BE the hands and voice of Jesus Christ in this world.

Now, I realize that not EVERYONE in this church FEELS this DEEP kind of COMPANIONSHIP here in our United Church of Christ in Keene. In fact, according to the *Heart Speaks to Heart* meetings I've been having, that was lifted up as one our primary hopes and dreams in almost EVERY meeting. So you see: THAT needs to be our GOAL. And I hope and trust that, AS you and I continue walking this journey together which we've ONLY just BEGUN, more and MORE among us will FEEL like we have COMPANIONS on the journey. But I WARN you: it will take a GOOD deal of EFFORT by ALL of us! And we NEED to REALIZE from the start that we will DISAGREE sometimes on various policies and plans, decisions and priorities. We will DISAGREE sometimes regarding certain things that go ON in worship or other events. We WILL all continue to have our OWN opinions about HOW things might be BETTER around here. And of course, we'll ALL have certain people here with whom we REALLY get along, and OTHERS with whom we DON'T. And YES, we may even have REMIND each other occasionally that we ALL need to BE living in community together ACCORDING to our new *BEHAVIORAL Covenant* (WHICH, by the way, you'll see POSTED in various places around the church). But you know: in SPITE of the difficulties and disagreements, WE can still LOVE and CARE for each other! We can still MINISTER to each other and be COMPANIONS to one another, AS we work TOGETHER to fulfill the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ.

And I suggest that we use the FIRST disciples of Jesus as our MODEL! Did you know that it's a MIRACLE that they weren't at each others' throats EVERY single SECOND! Nowhere ELSE in that WHOLE society would you have been able to get THAT particular group of people to be in COMMUNITY with one another, and to live and travel TOGETHER. It just would NOT have HAPPENED! In fact, they would have literally KILLED each other in ANY other setting, because AMONG them was a TAX collector, who served the Roman government, AND at least a couple of ZEALOTS, who said: *the only GOOD Roman is DEAD Roman, and ANYONE who SERVES them.* HOWEVER, because of their common LOVE for Jesus, THEY became COMPANIONS! THEY became BREAD partners! They TRANSCENDED their many differences, and REALIZED that the CLOSER they got to JESUS, the CLOSER they came to one ANOTHER! And IN the PROCESS of sharing life with HIM, they developed such a DEEP and lasting COMPANIONSHIP that they would not only ENDURE His death on the CROSS, and all the dashed HOPES and DREAMS that died WITH Him, but they would ALSO work together to BUILD the foundations of the greatest organization in the history of the world, the Christian church. They would work together to share CHRIST with the ENTIRE known world at that time! And like a BRUSHFIRE, the fledgling church would SPREAD to EVERY corner of the globe, CHANGING the lives of BILLIONS of people through the centuries. And these FEW disciples started it ALL! And they DID it in **3 simple WAYS!** First, they saw their ENTIRE lives, in EACH of its settings, as a MINISTRY in the name of Christ! SECOND, they gave

GENEROUSLY of their time, their talent and their treasure to FURTHER the ministry and mission of Christ in this world. And THIRD, they CONTINUALLY gathered BACK into COMMUNITY, into the CHURCH, to be NOURISHED and EMPOWERED by their worship, their study, AND by their DEEP companionship with their brothers and sisters in CHRIST!

And friends, WE are called to do the SAME! WE are to called to KEEP Christ FIRST in our LIVES, and to make our entire LIFE -- at HOME, in the WORKPLACE, in the COMMUNITY, and in the CHURCH -- a MINISTRY in HIS name. WE are called to use WHATEVER gifts we've been BLESSED with -- our TIME, our TALENTS and our TREASURE -- for the MINISTRY and MISSION of Christ in this world. And WE are called to be COMPANIONS to one another on the journey, breaking BREAD and sharing LIFE, rejoicing and suffering TOGETHER, bearing LOVE and believing in the LOVE of God. Yes, friends, AS the CHURCH of Jesus Christ, WE are to MODEL a DIFFERENT kind of community -- **AND** -- a DIFFERENT kind a WORLD -- a community and world where people truly CARE for each other, even if they don't always AGREE, AND where they work HARD at being COMPANIONS to one another, sharing the stuff of life. And that's MY goal for US, and I hope it will be YOURS as well. Well, in celebration of our companionship, I'd like to teach you a SONG. And it's simply called, *COMPANIONS on the Journey*.

## **COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY**

by Carey Landry

**Chorus:** We are companions on the journey,  
Breaking bread and sharing life;  
And in the love we bear is the hope we share,  
For we believe in the love of our God,  
We believe in the love of our God.

1. No longer strangers to each other  
No longer strangers in God's house;  
We are fed and we are nourished by  
The strength of those who care,  
By the strength of those who care.
2. We have been gifted with each other,  
And we are called by the word of the Lord;  
To act with justice, to love tenderly,  
And to walk humbly with our God,  
And to walk humbly with our God.
3. We are made for the glory of our God,  
For service in the name of Jesus;  
To walk side-by-side with hope in our hearts,  
For we believe in the love of our God.  
Yes, we believe in the love of our God.