

“Hole in the Roof,”
January 24, 2010

Mitch Albom has a new book out that's on the best seller list. It's entitled *Have a Little Faith*, and my guess is that some of you have read it. One of the stories he tells is about a church in Detroit that's led by a pastor named Henry Covington. Albom hears about the church as he is searching for charities to whom to give some financial help. His first entrée into Covington's church reveals that the church is in a state of total disrepair, and even has a sizeable hole in the roof that lets in the wind and rain and snow and cold.

Because of Henry Covington's past, Albom is initially quite reluctant to offer much in the way of assistance. After all, Henry has spent time in prison, was a drug dealer, and did his share of stealing, living a life of crime. How was the author to know if this church thing was just a cover-up for some of his past unlawful activities?

Over the course of some months, Albom hears Henry's story—the rats that infested their home when he was a kid, the early nuggets of his faith, how he got addicted to drugs and would do anything to get them, his close calls with death, and how he came to be the leader of I Am My Brother's Keeper ministry in the forsaken center of Detroit. Finally, Albom makes a token contribution to provide a blue tarp to cover the hole in the roof of the church, offering at least a little protection from the wintry elements.

One of the stories about Jesus is about a hole in the roof, and it serves as our Bible passage for today. It is from the first gospel written after the death of Jesus, Mark's gospel, and it tells the

story this way: Jesus was preaching the message to them when four men arrived, carrying a paralyzed man to Jesus. Because of the crowd, however, they could not get the man to him. So they made a hole in the roof right above the place where Jesus was. When they had made an opening, they let the man down, lying on his mat.

I've left out the ending to the story which most scholars interpret as the main meaning of this event—that of the connection between faith, forgiveness and wholeness. However, I left that part out intentionally, because I want us to focus on the first part of the story. Taking the story as it is told, we have four men—we assume them to be friends of the man they're carrying. They're bringing him to Jesus to get him help, but the house is jammed with people, and they can't get inside the door. Given the construction of the day, they probably ascended an outside stairway, and removed a portion of the roof in order to help their friend get the attention of Jesus. They made a hole in the roof to help their friend.

Why do I share these two stories about buildings and holes in the roof? Because I think in a very real way, each of us is like a building with a hole in the roof. Somehow we are damaged, broken, wounded, less than whole. Maybe we are struggling with addiction the way Henry Covington had been. Maybe we have been marginalized in one way or another. Maybe we are broken in spirit, discouraged, depressed, disheartened—perhaps by some outside life event, or perhaps because of some medical or psychological reason. Maybe our relationships are in shambles, and we feel incomplete and at loose ends. The list of ways in which our lives are in

disarray can be endless, but my guess is that, in one way or another, each of us lives with a metaphorical hole in the roof.

What do we do once we acknowledge that is the case? Perhaps we do what Henry Covington did. He committed his life to God, and he drew on the reserves that his faith provided, and he resolved to change his life. He did that by helping those he knew and understood—those who were homeless, trapped in addiction, those who had been imprisoned, those whose lives were in bits and pieces, and he did what he could to help them.

Even when the gas got turned off in the church, and they were threatened with the same scenario with the electricity, he continued to feed the homeless and offer them a place to sleep. He kept connecting with people, learning their stories, and helping them find life through helping other people. It was hearing the stories from those Henry helped that Mitch Albom finally came to believe that this ministry was on the level.

He heard one story after another about how Henry had helped this person and that one. The story of a man named Cass was fairly typical. Cass had been a star athlete in high school, had gone to the army, but when he came home, he became a drug dealer. He had been stabbed and left for dead in a drug deal gone bad, had spent time in prison, had gone back to drugs upon his release and wound up homeless, sleeping wherever he could.

He did what he could to make a little money, even pretending to park cars at some of Detroit's sporting events, but for five years at night, he ended up sleeping in an abandoned housing unit in the projects. In was

during that time that Cass met Henry Covington, who came around every day with food on top of his car. He offered that food to all those who needed it, and asked for nothing in return, but just kept saying "Remember, Jesus loves you." When Henry had received deliveries from food banks to help the hungry, Cass would help him, but mostly he helped himself. Even though Henry knew full well what Cass was doing, he just kept the connection open, even asking him to do some landscaping work to earn some money.

Long story made short, the only clothes Cass had were ruined, and he went to Henry to tell him he couldn't do the work. Henry got him some new clothes, took him in and allowed him to sleep on the couch in his own home and the transformation began. The Cass Mitch Albom interviewed was an amputee who was an elder in Henry's ministry, and spent his days helping those who had been where he had been. Even in his own physical, emotional and spiritual brokenness, he was able to reach out and help others.

If Henry could do that with the hole in his own life, if Cass could do that with the hole in his life, if the ministry could house homeless and feed the hungry with a giant hole in its roof, then why can't we? No matter what the brokenness in our lives is, I believe God can and does work through that brokenness to bring healing and hope to us, and allows us to share with others so they can find the courage they need to reach out and touch even more people.

It's like the proverbial pebble in the pond effect. Throwing that one little pebble in the water may not seem to make a very big splash, but the ripples from the stone entering the water go out

and out and out, becoming far-reaching. That's the way it is with any loving actions we undertake, no matter how great or how small. The ripples from our action continue to go outward, touching more and more people, and making a greater difference than we can ever imagine.

It starts with allowing God's love to seep into our lives, which opens our eyes and helps us see the needs around us. That becomes the impetus we need to get outside ourselves, outside of our own hurts and needs, our depression and loneliness, and focus on others. Whenever we look around, we can always find someone who has greater needs and greater hurts than we do. When God's love combines with our shift of focus, that changes everything. No longer are we navel-gazing all the time, but we're looking at the world around us in a totally new way, looking for ways we can help someone else, even through our own pain.

That's really what Fresh Start does—through Judy House's personal history with domestic violence, she knew the gaps in the system, and created a ministry to fill the void and help others get a new start in life. That's what helps AA be so effective—people sharing similar experiences, and out of their brokenness, helping one another stay clean and sober one day at a time. While I haven't researched it thoroughly, my guess is that's true of probably every one of our 10% recipients began—people seeing a need through their own brokenness and then filling that need, using the brokenness for good by helping others.. That's ultimately the only way any good can come out of any misfortune or tragedy—the determination to let God in to turn

something terrible into something positive. That's really redemption.

Mitch Albom said it best when he wrote these words: "I realized that, in some ways, we all have a hole in our roof, a gap through which tears fall and bad events blow like harsh wind." But, Albom continues, "With a little faith, people can fix things, and they truly can change." I believe he's right on target, and I agree when he affirms that there is a divine spark within each of us, a spark that may sometime save the world—if we let it. Are we willing?

Closing:

Mother Theresa was known for her compassionate care of those who were struggling with life, and she noted more than once that there are those around us right here and right now who are in need. She said there are those who are:

Hungry, not only for bread,
--but hungry for love.

Naked not only for clothing,
--but naked of human
dignity and respect.

Homeless not only for want of a
room of bricks,
--but homeless because of
rejection.

In our own way, we're all hungry and naked and homeless, and yet we can get beyond ourselves and help others, making this world a better place. My hope and prayer is that we will do exactly that.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.