Sunday, November 25, 2001
ASSISTED LIVING
Romans 8 (selected verses)

Because we human beings are living longer, there are more and more people who are now moving in the latter stages of their lives to places that offer “assisted living.” My stepmother, Bonnie, is a good example. She is 99 years old, and her eyesight is very limited.

After my father died, to whom she was married for 17 years following the death of my birth mother, Bonnie lived alone as long as she could. But as her eyesight got worse, which caused other problems, she needed to live in a place where regular and organized assistance was available.

So about five years ago, after consultation with her children and stepchildren, she decided to move to a small assisted living place where she has her own small apartment, and where all of her meals are provided. There are staff people on the premises who see that she takes the daily medications that are prescribed. If she needs help in any of her daily routines, people are there to assist her. Many of her close friends live there. Transportation is provided so that she is able to attend the church where she has been a long-time member, as well as other community activities she desires. Her children and grandchildren visit her whenever possible.

When she wants companionship, her friends are available, and when she wants privacy, she can be in her own apartment. She especially enjoys mealtimes because she has the opportunity to eat and visit with her friends, and she gets the balanced diet that she needs.

More and more of these types of assisted living places are being built as we human beings live longer. However, in the deepest sense, the fact is that all of us are involved in assisted living, and we always have been. When you first enter the world as a newborn baby, you need lots of assistance to stay alive. And not only as a baby or as an elderly person, but at every stage of life, we are assisted in countless ways, many of which we are unaware of, from the cradle to the grave.

That you might need some special assistance or more organized assistance later in life should be no embarrassment. People have been helping us all along. Life on earth as a human being means assisted living, whether you know it or not. Assisted living is the only way you can get through life. This is an important fact to remember in a society that values independence and individualism.

There was a young man who was working in a garage with his dad, and this young man was complaining. He said, “I don’t owe the world a thing. I didn’t ask to be born.” You’ve probably heard some people make a similar statement. While it’s true that nobody asks to be born, it does not automatically follow that you don’t owe the world anything. You have a tremendous debt to the past — to those who have gone before you — and to God, which you can easily take for granted.

The young man in the garage had never taken a moment to think about how everything he was doing was a free gift from the past. His tools, his machinery, his clothes, indeed his health itself — all were invented, developed, or fortified by his ancestors. How many of us could survive at all without this tremendous inheritance we accept so easily and sometimes so thoughtlessly?

Consider again the brilliant people, the patient people, the dedicated individuals who labored often without reward on projects both great and small, from the steam engine to the safety pin. This young man in the garage would be like a beast in the forest if it were not for better people than he. He would be unclad, unshod, ravaged by the elements.

Not any one of us contributes more than one-millionth of one percent to the accumulated knowledge and comfort we call civilization. The farmer inherits his tools from the wisdom of the past; the manufacturer depends upon the kind of brains that were more interested in progress than profit. The student in school benefits from untold hours of research and devotion.

The whole world is a gigantic legacy of assisted living. Imagine having to start fresh each generation. Who would invent the wheel, devise the lever, or construct the alphabet and multiplication tables?

We owe gratitude to God, and beyond this, we owe loyalty and thanksgiving to the past. We are all alive because we are constantly assisted in our living, and we assist others in their living. We were born into a world where most of the basic elements were already waiting for us. We merely combine and rearrange them for our pleasure or profit.

I believe that one of the best ways to describe the church is that it is to be an assisted living community. That is part of its basic mission because God has so created us that we need each other and that we are meant to assist one another.

Not only do you need other human beings to assist you, but you need countless additional microorganisms. Dr. Lewis Thomas illustrates this beautifully in his book of essays, The Lives of a Cell. He writes: “A good case can be made for our nonexistence as entities. We are not made up, as we had always supposed, of successively enriched packets of our own parts. We are shared, rented, occupied.” He continues, and now I’m paraphrasing: each human body contains millions of microorganisms. Without them, we could not move a muscle, drum a finger, think a thought, or digest our food. We are inhabited by bacteria and nuclei that may have come in, at one time or another, from the fusion of ancestral cells. We live in a dancing matrix of helpful viruses that dart, almost like bees, from organism to organism.

He goes on to point out that, contrary to what many people believe, most of the associations between the living things we know about are essentially cooperative ones, symbiotic in one degree or another. When they have the look of adversaries, it is usually a standoff relationship, with one part issuing signals and warnings, flagging the other off. Every creature is, in some sense, connected to and dependent on the rest.

Although our ancestors in our religious faith — in the Hebrew scriptures and in the New Testament — did not have the biological knowledge we have, they knew that God created the universe and us in a connected way. We need each other, and we need God, who created us and connects us. We are dependent upon many other creatures in God’s creation. That’s why the Apostle Paul could write as he did in his letter to the Romans: “We know that all things work together for good to those who love God... If God is for us, who can be against us?... Nothing can separate us from the love of God.”

Now, what does all this have to do with you and me as we go about living our lives day by day? Perhaps this story will help.

The man I came to visit was propped up in his bed. He had been confined to his bed for more than a year, and he knew there was no chance of any improvement in his condition. He was almost like Morrie in that book, Tuesdays with Morrie, except in his attitude.

Each time I came to visit, we usually began our conversation in the same way: the health of our families, the activities of mutual friends, how the church was doing, the weather, and, if it was football season, Nebraska football. But when we came to the end of this kind of talk, he would always ask the same questions: “Why am I still here? Of what use am I?”

Each time my friend asked me these questions, I realized that even though I have good health, a vocation to which I feel called by God, and much to look forward to in life, these same questions haunt me from time to time. Why am I here, after all? Am I making a difference for the good in people’s lives? What meaning can there be in life and in death? I’m sure you find yourself asking similar questions.

Then someone told me about another man, age 30. I do not know his name. Three times a week or more, he comes close to death. He looks much older than his age. Some years ago, he was told that his kidneys were failing, so he has been taking dialysis treatments three times a week.

In the city where he lives, he works with the Youth Commission. His philosophy is that once you have accepted the fact that you’re dying, you should fill your life with living.

One evening when he was working with young people, he discovered that his muscles wouldn’t work. He couldn’t stand up. He was rushed to the hospital several miles away. Before his dialysis could be started, his heart stopped. They resuscitated him, and after a few days in the hospital, he was back at work with the young people.

People say he looks kind of funny. The drugs he has to take make his hair fall out in patches, so he has shaved his head. Fad and fashion don’t mean much to him. A lot of people think his clothes are odd. They are. Some people think he looks a bit frightening. He does. Some think his attitude toward life is strange.

Don’t misunderstand. This young man is not any great hero. He is simply an individual who comes very near to death quite often. He knows the meaning of assisted living. He goes to the dialysis center to be attached to a machine three times a week for a number of hours each time. To be an appendage to a machine, to know that your life depends on stainless steel tanks and a few yards of plastic tubing — this is truly assisted living. Medications must be taken in careful dosages and at prescribed hours. It doesn’t sound very much like he’s free. But he is.

He is free because he has found a way to fill each of life’s moments with meaning. He is free because he is not afraid of death. He has found a way to be of assistance to other human beings. He works with young people because he likes and understands them. They get beyond his strange appearance. He is one human being relating in love to other human beings. He does not suffer the illusion of immortality.

Jesus told a story about another man. We don’t know his age, but apparently, he had no unusual health problems. He had everything in terms of material possessions. He was a rich farmer. He was highly pleased with himself and his increasing wealth. He wouldn’t think of giving any of it away. Because he was wealthy, he also thought he was wise. In fact, he

thought he was so wise and deserving of all that he had that he couldn't ever imagine dying and having to leave it all behind. He was convinced that he not only deserved all he had but had gotten it all without assistance from anyone. He was a self-made man and worshiped his creator.

According to the story, as Jesus told it, God said to this man, "Fool, this night your soul is required of you... so what good are all these things to you?"

This man was a fool for several reasons. He was a fool because he thought he was a self-made man. He had no concept of the meaning of "assisted living." He was a fool because he thought he had no other responsibilities, except to himself. He was also a fool because he failed to take into account that one day he would die.

I meet fools like this every day — individuals who believe they are not receiving any assistance in their living and are reluctant to give any assistance. Therefore, they do not know the meaning of being grateful.

I also meet people every day who are like the young man with kidney disease. He was fully aware that one day he would die. He knew that he could not live without the assistance of medical technology and the love and support of others. Therefore, he was also aware that each moment in his life was a precious gift, an opportunity to make a difference.

Some of the most beautiful people I've had the privilege of knowing over the years have been those with a terminal illness. Because they know they are going to die, even though they don't know when, they have been able to let go of hate and guilt and have been able to love others unconditionally in the same way as God loves us. They are also thankful for the gift of assisted living.

A little girl confused her nighttime prayer. She prayed, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I live..." The real tragedy is to die before you live. Amen.