

“Who Is YOUR Keeper?”  
 (or, What to Do When YOU Are  
 in a Difficult Situation.)  
 John 17:1-11  
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 OAPC – Rock Hill, SC  
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**John 17:1-11 (Contemporary English Version)**

(Note: The setting is the Upper Room on the night of “The Last Supper.” Jesus is speaking to the disciples. Then follows this prayer for his disciples.

1. *After Jesus had finished speaking to his disciples, he looked up toward heaven and prayed: “Father, the time has come for you to bring glory to your Son, in order that he may bring glory to you.*
2. *And you gave him power over all people, so that he would give eternal life to everyone you gave him.*
3. *Eternal life is to know you, the only true God, and to know Jesus Christ, the one you sent.*
4. *I have brought glory to you here on earth by doing everything you gave me to do.*
5. *Now, Father, give me back the glory that I had with you before the world was created.*
6. *You have given me some followers from this world, and I have shown them what you are like. They were yours, but you gave them to me, and they have obeyed you.*
7. *They know that you gave me everything I have.*
8. *I told my followers what you told me, and they accepted it. They know that I came from you, and they believe that you are the one who sent me.*
9. *I am praying for them, but not for those who belong to this world. My followers belong to you, and I am praying for them.*
10. *All that I have is yours, and all that you have is mine, and they will bring glory to me.*
11. *Holy Father, I am no longer in the world. I am coming to you, but my followers are still in the world. **So keep them safe by the power of the name that you have given me.** Then they will be one with each other, just as you and I are one.*

The ancient story-teller in the first chapters of The Book of Genesis was very talented. Wouldn't it be great to have that Genesis bard, that poet-singer here at Oakland Avenue to tell our children's story every Sunday in worship? After he tells the story of Adam and Eve, he next tells the story of the first murder, when Adam and Eve's son, **Cain**, kills his brother Abel. It is in that story after the murder, when God questions Cain, that Cain asks the question which has become the hallmark of irresponsibility:

**“Am I my brother's keeper?”**

If you have read about Jesus in the New Testament, then you know what Jesus would say: “YES...YOU ARE YOUR BROTHER’S KEEPER!” One of the best-known stories that Jesus told was about “*The Good Samaritan*” who was his brother’s keeper. That is the way the followers of Jesus are supposed to live.

**“Am I my brother’s keeper?”**

All of this came to mind this past week when the little word “**keep**” seemed to leap out at me from today’s passage when Jesus prays:  
**“Holy Father...keep them safe by the power  
of the name that you have given me.”**

DO YOU EVER THINK ABOUT GOD BEING YOUR “KEEPER”?

This past week I pulled an old friend out of my bookshelves. It is Clyde Edgerton’s book, Walking Across Egypt. The last I knew, Clyde Edgerton was Professor of Creative Writing at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, NC. I am a fan of Clyde Edgerton, and I commend his books to you.

Walking Across Egypt tells the tale of **Mattie Rigsby**, a 78-year-old-widow who lives by herself in her brick, ranch-style house in Listre, North Carolina. Mattie has been alone since her husband Paul died of a heart attack 5 years earlier.

A little dog has taken up at Mattie’s house, and Mattie has called the dogcatcher to come and get the dog. **Robert**, Mattie’s 43-year-old, unmarried son who runs the Convenient Food Mart in Bethel, N.C., encouraged his mother to keep the little dog for company and companionship. To which Mattie replied,

**“You know, it takes more than feeding to keep a dog.  
I got as much business keeping a dog  
as I got walking across Egypt.”**

[Edgerton, Clyde, Walking Across Egypt, Chapel Hill,  
Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1987, p. 4]

There are three things that you need to know about Mattie Rigsby.

- (1) She was a good mother.
- (2) She was a very faithful member of the First Baptist Church of Listre, North Carolina. She went to church every Sunday morning, every Sunday evening, and on Wednesday night.
- (3) She liked to watch soap operas on television, but she did not want anyone to know that she watched them!

I want to read a passage to you this morning that takes place after Mattie Rigsby has called the dogcatcher to come pick up the stray dog.

Another thing that Mattie has decided to do on this same day is to re-cover the seats on the chairs at her kitchen table, along with the seat in her favorite rocking chair in the den. A friend has agreed to do the re-covering work, and so Mattie has proceeded to remove the old seats from the four kitchen chairs as well as the seat from her favorite rocking chair in the den.

She has stacked the seats near the den door so that the friend can pick them up later that day. It has then registered with Mattie that she has to cover the empty seat holes in the chairs if she is going to be able to use them while the seats are being recovered. So, Mattie has gone out to the garage where she has found four wide boards to put across the four holes of the four kitchen chairs. Since she could not find a fifth board to cover the hole in her favorite rocking chair in the den, Mattie decides that she will wait to do this after lunch. It is at this point that I want to begin to read.

Bill left with the chair bottoms at 12:35. Mattie stacked the dishes beside the sink. She had gotten into the habit of not washing her dishes right away after lunch. She waited until "All My Children" was over at two. Nobody knew.

If anybody every found out that she both watched that program and didn't clean up right after she ate, she didn't know what she would do.

But after all, things did happen in the real world just like they happened on that program. It was all fiction, but anybody who read the paper nowadays knew things like that were happening all the time. And that woman who played the old lady was such a good actress, and Erica, Erica was good, too---such a good character, good actress. People almost exactly like her actually existed all over the place nowadays.

And why shouldn't she sit down for an hour a day after dinner and do something for herself? Why, Alora sat around the house all day, watching soap operas, and then went so far as to talk to people about them. Alora's watching so much television was one reason that when she went on her daily walk she carried that pistol in her hand under a Kleenex...

It was one o'clock on the dot. She walked into the den, bent over and clicked the TV on. She slowly walked backward, still bending over, toward the rocker. her left hand reached behind her to find the chair arm. Ah, the commercial---New Blue Cheer---was still on. She had started sitting down when a mental picture flashed into her head: **the chair without a bottom!** But her leg muscles had already gone lax. She was on her way down. Gravity was doing its job. She continued on past the customary stopping place, her eyes fastened to the New Blue Cheer box on the TV screen, her mind screaming "no," wondering what bones she might break, wondering how long she was going to keep on going down, down, down.

When she jolted to a stop, the backs of her thighs and a spot just below her shoulders were pinched together tightly. Her arms were over her head. Her bottom was one inch from the floor. Nothing hurt except the backs of her legs, and that seemed to be only from the pressure. How could she have forgotten? she thought.

She was amazed that her right arm which she normally couldn't lift very high was so high over her head. And not hurting much. She tried to get her arms down but couldn't. She was wedged tightly. What was she going to do? She looked at Erica on the TV screen.

In a straight line were Mattie's eyes, her knees, and Erica's face.

Nothing seemed broken. But her arms were going to go dead to sleep if she didn't hurry and get them down. She needed to pull herself up somehow. What in the world? What a ridiculous fix. That dog. If I hadn't been feeding him, she thought, and calling the dogcatcher, this wouldn't have happened. Lord, have mercy---What if Alora comes in the back door and sees me watching this program? What in the world will I say? Well, I'll just say I was sitting down to watch the news when I fell through, and so of course I couldn't get up to turn off that silly soap opera. That's what I'll tell her.

Then she will see my dishes stacked over there.

I've got to get up. She will know I came over here to sit down before I did my dishes. I've got to get...

Mattie's predicament suddenly seemed serious. What if...Alora might not come. Robert might not come. For sure he wouldn't come before Saturday.

Mattie had known all along there was some reason Robert ought to come more than once a week. Well, this proved it. Maybe now he would start coming once in a while to see if she was all right, hadn't had a heart attack, or a stroke, or hadn't...for heaven's sake, fallen through a chair. Well, this was the...the most ridiculous fix she had ever heard of. If there were some way to get that dog to bark or somehow go get somebody. How in the world could she get that dog to do something?...

**Lamar Benfield** had been a dogcatcher for four days...He walked around to the backyard, looked for a dog. There: a fice on the back steps. He wondered if that was the dog he was supposed to pick up. The back door was open. He looked in through the screen, glanced down at the dog. Dog's a little tired or something, he thought. He looked back inside. "Anybody home?"

"Come in. Please come in."

He opened the door and stepped into the den. the room was dark except for the TV and someone sitting.....Damn, she didn't have no neck at all! That was the littlest person he'd ever .....Wait a minute. What in the world was...?

It spoke: "I'm stuck in this chair."

His eyes adjusted. She was stuck way down in the frame of a rocking chair. "God Almighty. How long you been like that?" he asked.

"Since the news came on---after lunch. Can you help me get out of here?"

"Well, yes ma'am. I can maybe pull you out." [Ibid, pp. 8-13]

Mattie Rigsby would understand the petition of Jesus in today's passage when Jesus prays: "**Holy Father, keep them in thy name which thou has given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.**" [John 17:11; RSV]

**Mattie Rigsby** would understand the theological concept that *God is her keeper*.

Now, it may be that you have never gotten caught in the bottom of a chair, but there are countless other ways that you and I have found ourselves to be helpless and in need. **Would YOU understand the theological concept that *God is your keeper*?**

I told you last Sunday of my conducting the Memorial Service for Anne Kolb Roddey in the chapel here at OAPC. I used the 121<sup>st</sup> Psalm because it has to do with **God as our keeper**. Listen as I read it to you:

I lift up my eyes to the hills.  
 From whence does my help come?  
 My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.  
 He will not let your foot be moved,  
 He who **KEEPS** you will not slumber.  
 Behold, he who **KEEPS** Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.  
 The Lord is your **KEEPER**.  
 The Lord is your shade on your right hand.  
 The sun shall not smite you by day,  
 Nor the moon by night.  
 The Lord will **KEEP** you from all evil;  
 He will **KEEP** your life.  
 The Lord will **KEEP** your going out and your coming in,  
 From this time forth and forevermore. [RSV]

**Mattie Rigsby** would understand the theological concept that *God is her keeper*.

Now, it may be that your have never gotten caught in the bottom of a chair, but there are countless other ways that you and I have found ourselves to be helpless and in need.

**Do YOU think that YOU understand the theological concept that *God is your keeper?***

“Georgia Tom” Dorsey was born in Villa Rica, Georgia, in 1899 and died in 1993 in Chicago where for forty years he had been the Choral Director of the Pilgrim Baptist Church. In 1932 when his wife died, “Georgia Tom” Dorsey wrote the most popular Black gospel hymn ever written, made famous by the civil rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr.

For certain, “Georgia Tom” Dorsey knew that *God was his keeper*, and the song which he wrote was **“Precious Lord, Take my Hand.”**

That is a good prayer for each of the members of our 2008 Confirmation Class.

**“Precious Lord, Take my Hand.”**

It is a good prayer for our Elders and Deacons and members of our PNCs.

**“Precious Lord, Take my Hand.”**

It is a good prayer for every person in this room as we leave church today.

**“Precious Lord, Take my Hand.**

It is Hymn #404 in The Presbyterian Hymnal, and we are going to sing it now.

I am praying that you will want to use it as your public way of saying that

**“*God is MY keeper.*”**

And I am hoping that the melody of this hymn is going to wander around in your minds all this next week, reminding you that

**“*God is MY keeper.*”**