



There are many things I wish I would do better with this whole pastor gig, including getting to know people's names much sooner than it usually takes me. Nevertheless, once it finally happens, the names tend to stick, for they are the names of pillars for the church, all built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ, our Lord. One such pillar was Alice Schinkel, who I first met at a congregational meet-and-greet much like the one we had here in our fellowship hall a couple months ago. However, at this one from over a decade ago, questions could be asked of me from the floor in front of everyone.

Now, it was proper decorum to avoid too personal of questions for the potential pastor, especially to avoid scaring them away far too quickly. Except, Alice had reached a point in her life when she simply did not care about such social church expectations. So, as I was introducing myself to the large group of new people, I let them know I had been dating Sarah for almost a year. For most church-going Christians, that would be more than cute and adorable enough to know. But that did not satisfy the stubborn pillar of Alice Schinkel. She was not ashamed whatsoever to ask, "When do you plan on making an honest woman out of her and marry that girl?"

It didn't stop there, though. I had heard that Alice found what she thought was the perfect spot at the center end of one the pews about a third from the front, to be in just the right line of sight for whoever was at the pulpit. The perfect spot for when Alice thought the sermon was droning on too long for her liking, she would boldly point at her watch to indicate to the preacher to move the so-called Gospel proclamation along.

But her most important ministry was with the church blood drives. Unfortunately, with Alice's medical complications, she could not donate herself. But that didn't stop her from sitting at the end of the most important set of tables of all: the ones with snacks for all those who donated blood. However, if you wanted any part of that feast and celebration to the side of Alice, you had to go to her first, as she had this tightest death-grip on a clipboard, where you had to legibly sign your name so that she could read it, and put down the exact minute for which you approached her table. After that, you could then find a seat at Alice's snack feast and celebration, but you had to stay there exactly fifteen minutes, not a second less, when she would check your arm and make sure you were okay before you left the church building premises: the place that Alice claimed as her second home and where Alice was, yes, one of the most stubborn of pillars with a fair share of quirks, to say the least, but still a most wonderful pillar of that church, to be sure.

And with all such strongholds of congregation life, they tend to have their own words of wisdom as to how they believe the pivotal foundation of Jesus Christ sustains them throughout their life. So, whenever Alice was asked how she was doing, on her good days, at least, she would say: "The sun is shining, and God is in the heavens." I never had the guts to tell Alice that I didn't quite agree with her on that. At some point along the way, I wish I had told her, "Sorry Alice, but God doesn't stay in the heavens. And God does not just come down to lay the foundation of love and grace and hope in Jesus Christ. God doesn't just come down to raise up who we consider to be church giants in a Peter or a Paul or a Martin Luther even. God also comes down in you, Alice. Sorry, God does not stay in the heavens."

Oddly enough, while Alice thought some Gospel proclamations went on a bit too long from the pulpit, Alice found her own most precious short-and-sweet way of bringing such Great News to life for the youngest of her second family in the church. Although many of the youth probably thought she was cranky and uptight most of the time, still Alice would write them a card with a little gift to go along with it. Inside the card, it would read, “Remember Jesus loves you, and so do I.”

Being a school teacher in her younger years, Alice saw first-hand how many times children would be told they were not loved in a variety of ways. Alice believed it was one of the essential jobs of the church to ensure children of God of all ages never forget, “Remember Jesus loves you, and so do we.” It is the foundation of our faith. It is the short-and-sweet core of the Gospel that can never be taken away from us. The most precious pillar of Alice Schinkel, in spite of all her stubbornness and plenty of quirks to go along with, would never let us forget that Greatest News of all.

So, no, God doesn’t stay in the heavens. And God does not just come down in first century Galilee to lay a foundation of love and grace and hope and leave it all behind for us to figure it out. God comes down in Alice, in all of you, to build you up as pillars not just of Divinity, but for the whole world to know, “Remember, Jesus loves you, and so do we.” And for that foundation of Jesus Christ that empowers us to share that Gospel in whatever way we can, we most certainly give thanks to God indeed! Amen!