

## “Never Leave Them Unattended”

by Russ Tighe

Hello, my name is Russ — and thank you for having me speak today.

I’ve had some practice over the years — at council meetings, on CBC Radio, in our local news — but nothing keeps me in better practice than my time at St. Mary’s Church. I like to call it *God’s practice*, because it keeps me grounded.

You see, I’m trying to represent my community — from all sides, all perspectives — because like it or not, we’re all in this fight together.

And today feels like another mountaintop moment for me — a chance to shout how valuable and precious life truly is, and how important it is to be *mentally strong first*.

We would never leave a heart attack victim alone.  
We would never leave a child gasping for air alone.  
So why... do we leave the mentally unstable alone?

The answer, most often, is fear.  
Fear of what we don’t understand.  
Fear of what we can’t control.  
Fear that makes us step back when we should step forward.

But fear is not protection.  
Fear is abandonment.  
And abandonment is deadly.

I’ve lived here long enough to remember when the streets felt lighter — when neighbors stopped to talk, when hope was easy to see. But I’ve also watched how pain crept in — slowly at first, then all at once.  
One day, a man who’s chronically homeless asked me to read his poem, and with his permission, I’ll share a piece of it now:

“I’m not trying to get back, I’m trying to get better.  
I mask my suffering as it grows.  
I hide in the darkness so nobody knows.  
My mind is my prison, and I’ll never be free.  
I do what I can, just to cope,  
While all of you keep talking about hope.”

Those words hit me hard — because behind the garbage, the yelling, the drug use, there’s a story like this one. A person *trying* to get better.

And yet — we treat our mental health crisis the same way the world sometimes mishandles refugee crises:

We rush in with resources, but without structure.  
We pour hope into broken pipelines.

True relief — true recovery — requires *process and presence*.  
In a refugee crisis, trained workers intake each person's needs one at a time. They bring order where there is chaos. That's *habilitation* — and that's what we need for the mind.

Because those struggling with addiction, trauma, and mental illness are, in every sense, *refugees of the mind*.  
Displaced from safety, stability, and belonging — living under siege not from armies, but from relentless inner wars.

Fear tells us to stay away.  
Envy tells us, "They're not like us."  
But compassion says, "Stay."

Leave an Alzheimer's patient unattended, and they may wander into danger.  
Leave an addict unattended, and they may overdose in silence.  
Leave a teenager with suicidal thoughts unattended, and they may never see tomorrow.

The standard must be the same:  
Never leave them unattended — not the anxious, not the addicted, not the forgotten.

When I hit my lowest point, I remember thinking, "Where do I start?"  
And the answer was simple: *start anywhere... but start*.  
Because the only thing that kept me alive was the small thread of love still holding on.

That thread — that connection — is what saves people.

So today, my message is simple:  
Let's stop leaving people alone in their pain.  
Let's guide instead of shackle, heal instead of shame, and lift instead of judge.

Hope isn't a passing thought — it's what gets us up in the morning.  
Faith steadies us when we're shaken.  
And compassion reminds us that every one of us has struggled too.

Because when we see someone homeless, addicted, or high, we often see only the chaos — the tents, the litter, the brokenness.  
But what we fail to see is that their conscious self is asleep.  
They are not fully present to the consequences of their actions.

And I remember the words of Jesus:  
"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

If He could ask forgiveness for those who crucified Him, how much more should we see mercy in those who are simply lost within their pain?

They know not what they do.

They are not willfully choosing despair — they are *trapped within it*.

And our response must not be rejection — but mercy.

So from my heart, I say this:

Let's carry each other, not our silence.

Let's replace neglect with care, despair with trust, and fear with love.

Because in the end, this isn't just about aid.

It's about dignity.

It's about giving every person — every refugee of the mind — a chance to come home to themselves again.

God bless you all. My name is Russ.

Thank you for having me speak today