

**Friends Community Church
June 06, 2021
Encouragement**

Call-to-Worship

Psalm 121

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord,
the Maker of heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;
indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord watches over you—
the Lord is your shade at your right hand;
the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.
The Lord will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;
the Lord will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore.

Community Time

As of Saturday morning (when I finalize writing) over 70% of Manitoba residents over 18 have been vaccinated with the first vaccine. At the same time, we continue to send folks out-of-province for medical care. Health authorities say there will be little relaxation of restrictions as long as we send folks out for care. I think we have a responsibility to encourage our health care folks, each other, and our leaders through prayer. It is a discouraging time into which we pray encouragement.

Teaching

Encouragement - the action of giving someone support, confidence, or hope. (dictionary)

I have been thinking about encouragement a lot lately. It's such an important thing to do – to encourage each other. It's such an important thing to feel – that someone would take the time to encourage me.

The dictionary defines it as an action – the action of giving to someone support, confidence or hope. To feel hope and to feel supported and to feel confident because someone took the time to gift us with that is a special thing. It gets us through a lot of difficult times.

Watching a TV series about a hospital the other evening, there was an episode where an intern offered encouragement to a patient saying the surgeon was great and it would be ok. The circumstances were that it was not ok and was not going to be ok. The intern learned the lesson of false hope, false confidence and false hope.

We want folks to feel better which is why we encourage in the first place. But if it is false in any way, the person is suspicious of future encouragement. They find it harder to be hopeful or feel supported.

Most of us want to encourage each other. Having said that, I know there are times I have offered false encouragement. The results were not good. It was with the best of intentions, and I was sincere, but the end result was a lack of trust, not just in me, but in anyone who carried the title I carried, whether that be social worker or pastor.

I have lots to learn about encouragement. My mistakes have taught me only a little. One of those lessons is ‘the best of intentions’ is not enough. “But I meant well” becomes an excuse for when someone did not feel my actions were encouraging, and excuses do not cut the ice.

The best resource I have found, the best teaching tool about encouragement, the best textbook, is the bible. Today we are going to look at three examples from three New Testament books, each which teaches us something about encouragement. The three books are letters of Paul to the Galatians, Philippians and Ephesians.

Let’s look first at Philippians 1 for the 1st lesson - **find what can truly be encouraged and do that well.**

Philippians 1:3-8 - I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Paul talks about what he can honestly thank God for in the Philippian church. He has clearly worked at this – and has found an honest and trustworthy way of encouraging. In 5 short verses he takes the following actions – thanks God, prays with joy, confident in the Philippians faith – and its all because of

‘us’, the folks in Philippi! We are partners in the mission of the greatest love relationship there is – the love of Jesus.

Paul is almost overboard in his encouragement, but there is nothing false or misleading. It is 100% true, and that is what makes it work. Nothing is sugar-coated. Nothing is set aside. Both sides know it is true. Imagine receiving this. Imagine how motivated you would be to get on with the job shared with Paul.

The 2nd lesson is from Galatians, and it is very different than Philippians. In fact, without reading the whole book, it would be easy to see this as discouraging. And that is partially true. Which leads us to the lesson from Galatians. **Encourage what is wrong to stop and what is right to grow.**

Paul does this in three steps. First, he is really upset with the Galatians and he tells them why. They are being led away from the Gospel and Paul is angry. They know better. Galatians 1:6-7: *“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.”*

Paul starts out his letter with an emotional reaction to folks he loves. He is astonished they are deserting the true Gospel, the one with the grace of Jesus. It is hard to say what Paul is saying. No one should like or want to do this. In fact, if you want to do this you probably should not. It is very judgemental. It is discouraging for both the person saying it and the person hearing it.

Step two, Paul identifies what binds them together. This gives the Galatians something positive to think about while considering Paul’s criticism. In Galatians 4:13-16 he reminds them of their history together. Their history was because of how they treated him when he was sick. It is because of this he is so astonished they are deserting the Gospel. With this history how then has he become their enemy.

Galatians 4:13-16 – It was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you, 14 and even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. 15 Where, then, is your blessing of me now? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. 16 Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?

This is a very important and delicate aspect of true encouragement. When giving words that can be discouraging, make sure to have a positive history with the folks you are speaking with. Otherwise, why should they listen? Paul had that. They were listening to him. His question is rhetorical – how can I be an enemy when you were so kind when I was sick – how can I be an enemy when we are all followers of Jesus Christ?

Step three is looking forward with hope. Whatever has happened, hope is found in doing good, and Paul encourages that. *Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. (Galatians 6:8-10)*

Seek what is good and encourage that. Confront what is wrong and discourage that, but only when it can be done in the context of a loving relationship.

Lesson 3 is from Ephesians. **Encourage with specifics and pray for specifics.** Paul begins Ephesians by outlining the Gospel. Based on that he says the following. It's a bit or a longer text, but worth the reading. Ephesians 1:16-23: *“Ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”*

Paul doesn't have a concern with the Ephesians. So, he praises their faith – after specifying exactly what that faith is all about. He prays specifically for the gifts, in the Spirit, of wisdom and revelation. He prays specifically for hope they are called to and the inheritance that is there's. In prayer there is very real encouragement.

Feet-in-the-Dirt

1. Find what can truly be encouraged and do that well.
2. Encourage what is wrong to stop and what is right to grow.
3. Encourage with specifics and pray for specifics.

If we let it, these can be very discouraging times. The increase in depression, loneliness, suicidal thoughts, family violence – the list is a long one – because of the isolation we feel - these are all very real. Folks are going through hard times.

In the middle of that let's remember to encourage each other, but to that right. Let's not offer anything false or misleading. We are partners in the hope of Jesus Christ. That is our reality. We are part of a world that is broken. That is also our reality.

In that light, we need to encourage each other to keep pointing to the light that is Jesus Christ. We encourage each other by praying for specific things. Praying for endurance, for energy, for wisdom and discernment – we can do that and attach a specific name to each prayer.

We can thank God for each other – for things that are unique to each person. Paul does that – he thanks God for folks.

If we let it, these times can be discouraging. But if we work at it, they can be very encouraging. We can encourage each other today, not knowing what tomorrow brings.

After all, we only see dimly into the future. We know the end-game is heaven. What happens between now and then is not so clear. But today, there is something we can do. When we do this in love, we follow the words found in another book of the bible – 1 Corinthians 13:12-13. *For now, we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

I leave you with words I trust are encouraging. We see dimly right now, but that will change when we see Jesus face-to-face. That day is coming, but until then, have faith and hope and love in the one who saved us, Jesus Christ. And in our relationships, let's not forget the greatest gift we have been given is love. Because it is this gift Jesus commanded us to use to the fullest extent possible; to follow in his steps. Let's be careful of criticism, and free in true encouragement. Let's do what Jesus asked of us. *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. John 13:13*

The Lord be with you.