

Encourage One Another
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
September 19,2021-AM Service
Reverend Peter Jonker
1 Thessalonians 5:4-11

This morning we have the second sermon in our ‘One Another’ series. After a season that has been hard on community and after a season that has been – for many of us – discouraging, these sermons are meant to help us find our way back to Christian community and the kind of life together that flows from the heart of the gospel. Today’s One Another is Encourage one another and I have two passages picked out for today. Both include the call to encourage one another. Read Hebrews 3:12-19. 1 Thessalonians 5:4-11.

I’ve enjoyed studying encouragement this week. I admit that when I started, I thought, ‘What am I going to say about this? Encourage one another. Can something so basic be interesting?’ But that turns out to be what makes it interesting. Because in times of crisis, we go back to the basics. Before the accident the young woman walks freely and easily, she takes long strides without thinking. After the accident, after the surgery, she goes to rehab. Now, as she climbs out of bed, every step takes concentration. Every step takes thought. “How do I do this? How do my legs work? How do I distribute my weight? What does my body do when it walks?” To think about encouragement is to go back to the basics, the basics of love and community. Encouragement is fundamental to the craft of love. It’s basic. Just as lifting your foot is essential to walking, so encouragement is essential to loving community. When we study encouragement, we are learning the basics. A loving community is more than encouragement, but a community without encouragement will limp and stumble.

Maybe that’s a good metaphor for this whole “one another” series. We’re re-learning how to ‘walk.’ This is like PT. We’re going into rehab together. This sanctuary is our rehab hospital and we are relearning how to do community. Perhaps that makes me the physical therapist in this metaphor, but I don’t think that’s quite right, because I’m rehabbing just like you. I’m standing under the same book; I’m looking to the same Spirit to help me learn to walk in community with you.

So as we rehab community, our PT exercise today will be encouragement, and I would like to say 5 things about this community essential. First, encouragement is deeply biblical. The two passages we read this morning call us to encouragement and I chose them because they use the ‘one another’ phrase which is the theme of our sermon series. But the call to encourage and the word for encouragement appears throughout the New Testament. The Greek word for encourage is *parakaleo*, and when you add together all the times you find this word in the New Testament, when you add together the verbal and nominal forms of the word appear in the gospels and the letters, when you add up all the times the New Testament writers use *parakaleo* and its cognates, you see that *parakaleo* is used 138 times. That’s a lot of encouragement.

Of course *parakaleo* isn’t always translated as encouragement, it’s sometimes translated as comfort or comforting or comforter, sometimes it’s translated as urge or exhort, sometimes it’s translated as consolation. The word literally means ‘to call from alongside.’ ‘Kaleo’-to call ‘Para’-from alongside. Like parallel. So when you *parakaleo* someone, you are standing beside them, you’re moving in parallel with them, and you are helping them, urging them along: “Come on! You can do this! We are almost there! You’ve got this! We are going to make it. Don’t give up.” Studying the word this week I found myself thinking of my kids’ cross country meets. In cross country, if you are coming close to the end of the race and you catch up to a fellow teammate, instead of just passing them, as you come next to them (‘para’ them), you are supposed to say to them. “Come on! Let’s go. Go with me. We can do this!” That’s *parakaleo*.

Not only is the New Testament full of this word, so much of the New Testament *is* encouragement. In many cases encouragement is the reason for their existence. They are written to encourage the early church. Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians to encourage the Thessalonian church. The writer of Hebrews wrote his letter to a church who was getting tired and needed to be encouraged to persevere on the journey. The gospels were written for our encouragement. The book of Acts was written to encourage small churches who faced trials and opposition. When you see that the New Testament is full of encouragement, you get a sense of how basic it is to our Christian life, how important it is to the life of the church.

I read this week that encouragement is one of the ways that Christian teaching becomes Christian culture. We grow up and we learn church doctrine and we learn Bible stories. That’s all good, but it’s not until

that doctrine and those stories are communicated to each other in the form of encouragement that they start to form community. As I kid I learn the doctrine of providence. God is working all things to his purpose in this world. He is sovereign over our circumstances. I sit in my church school class and the doctrine gets in my head. That's good. But then my friend is going through a terrible time and I come alongside her – I come para her – and I say, 'Don't be afraid! God will get you through this! You are in his hand' Do you see what happened there? Teaching has become community. Doctrine has become culture. Words have become something like flesh. When we encourage, the Holy Spirit takes what's in our head and starts to make a community with it.

Encouragement is not only biblically basic, it's also easy. Anyone can do this. A kindergartner can do this! My wife teaches kindergarten, as you know. And kindergartners are really good at encouraging. As part of her lesson, she'll draw a picture on the board and one of them will say, "Mrs. Jonker you are such a good drawer!" And all the rest of the class will nod in agreement. And even though Mrs. Jonker knows she's only a pretty good drawer, does the encouragement of her student make her feel good? Does it lift her up? Does it make her day a little better? Yes, it does. Anyone can do this.

Years ago I read an article about suicide and basic kindness in *Atlantic Magazine*. The article opened with a story about a young man named Johnny Benjamin. When Benjamin was in his early twenties, he fell into a downward spiral of sadness. In despair he walked halfway across the Waterloo Bridge in London, England, and climbed up on the edge of the bridge and prepared to jump. A total stranger passing by stopped and said, "Hey don't worry mate. It'll get better." And then invited him off the ledge for a cup of coffee. That simple word of encouragement, "Don't worry mate! It'll get better" and the offer of a coffee saved Benjamin's life. Anyone can do this. You can do this. You can say a word, write a card, send a text, write a letter, send an email. You can do this and it can be life changing.

Encouragement is an especially important habit to practice in the wilderness. Did you notice that in both the Thessalonians passage and the Hebrews passage, God calls us to encourage one another in a context of trial and trouble? In Hebrews, the situation of the church is compared to the situation of Moses and the people of God in the wilderness. When they were going through the wilderness, how did the Israelites get off the rails? Instead of seeing the blessings of God, and instead of focusing of the acts of God in the past (he brought us out of Egypt!) and instead of focusing on the promises of God for the future (He is bringing you to a land flowing with milk and honey!), they complained. They grumbled. When times are complicated and uncertain there is always more grumbling. If the book of Exodus didn't convince you of that, the pandemic probably has. The early church is facing trials, so the author of Hebrews tells them, don't get into the negative habits of mind that plagued the people in the wilderness! Instead encourage one another. In times of stress and uncertainty and fear like the times we are in now, it is especially important that we guard against grumbling and encourage one another. In Thessalonians Paul doesn't use the exodus as his example, he talks about the threat of the darkness and he calls us to be children of the light, and children of the light encourage one another and build each other up.

I'm not going to go into a great disquisition about the difficulties of our times. You know the difficulties and you don't need someone else talking about the darkness and the peril. I will say this. In our times everyone is asking, "what do we do?! How do we change our society?" Here's a Biblical answer. Here's what the Spirit is saying: "Encourage one another."

Good encouragement pays attention. Specifically, it pays attention to the shape of another person's heart. There is a proverb that has some wisdom for us here. Proverbs 25:20 "Like vinegar poured on a wound is one who sings songs to a heavy heart." Trying to encourage someone with who is profoundly sad with "Don't be such a grumpkins!" is not going to be well received. The point here: If you really want to encourage, you've got to pay attention to your neighbor's heart. You've got to discern the shape of his pain, the shape of his struggle. General encouragement is great. "Don't be afraid!" "Hang in there!" "God is good!" "He is with you!" All good. But if you really want to lift him up, you speak to the shape of his pain.

You know your daughter in law really worries about her parenting, you know that she worries about how her kids are doing, and she never feels like she's doing a good job. So you don't just send her general encouragement, after you've been with her and your grandkid you send a text which says, "I think Jimmy is turning into such a nice boy! You guys are doing a great job!" Your encouragement pays attention to the shape of her pain and aims at her heart.

This kind of attention to the heart of the person is part of what separates encouragement from flattery. Flattery is not encouragement. Flattery is a compliment aimed at a person with the intent of manipulating them. You flatter someone because you want them to like you, because you want them on your side, because you want their money. You encourage someone because you want to help them down the road, you want to speak healing words to their soul.

Which brings me to the final thing I want to say about encouragement. Biblical encouragement is grounded in God's story. When you encourage someone you are probably doing one of two things. You are helping to recognize their strengths. "You can do it! I believe in you!" Or you are helping them to see a better future than they're currently feeling. "It's going to be okay! It's going to get better, mate!" Ordinary encouragement is grounded in human strength and human ability to make a better future. Which is fine. Helping someone to see that they are stronger than they think and that the future is better than they think is always good.

But biblical encouragement is better because it grounds our hope in the power and strength of Jesus which is infinitely more than we ask or imagine. Biblical encouragement is better because it grounds our future in God's future, which is unshakeable. Look at our passages. Where do Paul and the writer of Hebrews ground their encouragement? It's not in human strength. It's not in the cleverness of the church, or the resilience of the church or the faithfulness of the church – it's in the faithfulness and the strength of the triune God. Paul: God did not appoint us to suffer wrath, but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. God has your future so encourage one another. Hebrews: You have come to share in Christ, and Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith. You belong to him so encourage one another. Encouragement grounded in Jesus' strength and Jesus' story. When you encourage, by all means, remind the other person of his strengths. But don't stop there, lift his eyes a little higher and remind him that he is held by the strength of Jesus. When you encourage, by all means, tell the other person that her future is better than she thinks, but don't stop there. Lift up her eyes to see the future she has in Jesus.

I said earlier that the New testament was full of encouragement. You know who was a great encourager? Jesus. I want to close this sermon with the encouragement of Jesus for me and you as we face our stuff. Listen again to these familiar words. Let them lift up your head. Let them define your present and your future. Have no fear little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. In this world you will have troubles. Take heart. I have overcome the world. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; you shall be filled. I am the resurrection and the life, the person who believes in me will live, even though they die. In my Father's house there are many rooms and I am going there to prepare a place for you. Behold I am with you always, even to the end of the age. These are great words. Words to build a life on. Encourage one another with these words.

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