

ENCOURAGING ONE ANOTHER

A legend has it that the great warrior angel Michael demanded Satan give up all his weapons used to attack God's people. Satan agreed but continued to negotiate some sort of dignified retreat. He asked to retain just one weapon. Michael agreed: just one weapon in exchange for giving up the rest. The weapon Satan chose was discouragement. He figured that was his most powerful weapon.

This apocryphal story has a real point: discouragement is draining and ever threatening. Because of this, we have to get very good at encouragement. Today we look at how we might best encourage one another. First in a series on the "one another" commands.

To be discouraged is to fear the worst, it is to face each day and each circumstance as if things are going to be bad and you won't be able to cope. Phrases like "it won't work", "I can't do this", "I give up", "what's the point?"....these are all expressions of discouragement. Discouragement leads to cynicism, apathy, defeatism. And even worse, it is contagious. Especially when leaders are discouraged it can infect those they lead.

Granted we will all experience some discouragement at times, how can we avoid this being a chronic state of mind and being? The answer is to encourage one another. We are quite literally to give courage and strength to others. We help others face life situations with hope and faith. In context of the church, when I encourage you I am helping you better follow Jesus, better be the person he means you to be.

It is not flattery. Merely saying nice things about a person in order to make them feel better. Nor is it the spiritual equivalent of cheerleading. It is not mouthing positive sentiments in order to give someone a short term boost. It goes deeper, is based on deeper truths. It may sometimes be uncomfortable and involve rebuke (more in a later talk). But it will always help people better trust in Jesus, always give them courage.

We encourage in a few different ways. One is as a group when we meet together. HEBREWS 10:24-25 is the clearest expression of this. After our church gatherings, Sunday or otherwise, we ought to be encouraged. Challenged, comforted, happy, reflective, all these are possibilities but encouragement is to be the mainstay. The Bible text suggests that we treat meeting together as vitally important. But it assumes those meetings are encouraging.

Two things need to be said here. One is that if our meetings are not regularly encouraging, we need to radically reassess them. Not a question of pandering to consumerism or trying to please everyone or running little glee clubs. But are people leaving our gatherings with more courage and strength to live life for Jesus. Can we not understand why disturbing numbers of Christians now either don't attend church gatherings or attend them out of a sort of residual routine, if they are not being encouraged?

It is a dangerous half truth to say we don't come to church to get but rather to give. The trouble with that fine sounding statement is that unless we get we can't give. We love because he first loved us. We speak because he has already spoken. We need to be receiving the grace and love and even kindly rebuke of God in our gatherings if we are to become encouragers. Our task is not only to give out in our church gatherings but to receive. Otherwise we will have nothing to give. Only when we truly encounter the risen Jesus in our gatherings will we be empowered to encourage. Only as we experience his love will we love.

The other thing to note about this bible text from HEBREWS is that it is discouraging for us to see people irregular or absent from our gatherings. The very act of turning up is an encouragement. So we have two twin obligations. One is to ensure our gatherings are such that people are encouraged. The other is to for people to come and both give and receive encouragement.

We encourage one another by praying for one another. Bringing someone to God is a great way of giving them courage to follow Jesus. Yet don't say "I'll pray for you" as a cliché. Remember to

pray, if possible there and then. Remember to tell people you are praying. Remember to follow up to check answers to your prayers.

We encourage one another in spoken words. Our words have great power to hurt or heal. JAMES 3:1-12 tells us that. EPHESIANS 4:29 reminds us that only helpful words should come from our mouths. When you think about your life, human words have been great sources of encouragement and yet also great sources of discouragement. Let's note some things about our words.

They are truth based and so not mere flattery. They are specific, not just general. Merely having someone say "I encourage you" may become glib. They are directed to individuals and not just blanket statements to groups. They are directed towards everyone not just the obviously needy. We all need encouragement even if we appear to be on top of things. They can be facilitated or helped by taking the time publicly to thank people. Or to fill in encouragement cards and give them to people.

Expanding this a little, Larry Crabb in his book, "Encouragement" talks of three categories of words. Some words are death words. "You're hopeless". "You will never be as good as your sister." "What you did was unforgiveable." Such words hinder us in growing more like Jesus. Something inside us dies when we hear such words. We either give up or lash out. We are not encouraged.

Then there are neutral words. "Have a nice day". "How are you?" (assuming you don't really want to know!). These words don't do much harm but they don't do much good either. They lapse into cliché, they lack thought and genuineness. While they don't get inside to do any harm, nor do they get inside to do any good. They bounce off the surface. So again we need to ensure our words are meaningful, honest and as personal and specific as we can get.

The third category is life words. These do get inside, but because they are spoken as the truth in love they do us good. Note again that life words can be critical, but always constructive. When we hear life words we may have a spring in our step, our posture might

change, the sun breaks through the clouds, life is once more resonant with possibilities. Never underestimate the power of your seemingly casual words. They can, through the kind grace of God, change lives. May we speak them often, may we hear them often.

But encouragement also involves action. We have already noted that attending church gatherings is one such action. JAMES 2:14-17 speaks of the futility of mere encouraging words without the related actions. Sometimes words are all that we can offer. But just as our prayers for others need not be substitutes for action, nor will our encouraging words. They may be preludes to action.

Offering to take someone out to coffee; helping someone do some practical work in the church; going the extra mile on a rostered duty; having a reasonably pleasant demeanour; providing practical help for someone in crisis (though remember don't just confine this sort of thing to critical situations...make it routine).

This may sound very mundane, but it all helps this community here become more and more encouraging. That is, it helps those who attend and belong to it to have more strength, more faith, more hope, as they daily follow Jesus. Don't be discouraged about being an encourager. You don't have to fix problems or have all the answers. Encouragers bring God to people, they don't play God to people. They are enablers, not controllers.

Be thankful that encouragement has been woven into the life of this community of God's people. May it be that this becomes more and more evident. May it be that we can't wait to be here, to meet with God's people. Because doing so means we can encourage others, because doing so means we can be encouraged. Life throws many discouragements our way. May it be that our belonging here is a blessing rather than a burden because by our belonging we have been given the courage to press on, to trust more, to love more. May it be that we are both the givers and recipients of courage.