

Encourage One Another Building Community

1 Thessalonians 5:11

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Lately, we've been discussing what it means for the church to be a community, and how we can build and maintain a sense of community in the church. Why is this topic important? In our country, social bonds have been steadily eroding for the last forty years. People are less connected, less involved, less active in their communities. They participate less in organizations and groups of every kind than they did a generation ago. The "glue" that holds our society together, something academics call "social capital," has been getting weaker and weaker.

I've been reading a book by Robert Putnam, a professor at Harvard. The book is called "Bowling Alone," and in it, he documents the decline in community life in American over the last four decades. The title comes from a trivial but telling example: the percentage of adults who belong to a bowling league today is only about ¼ of what it was in the 1960's. Other examples:

- 1) The percentage of people who volunteer in a political campaign – stuffing envelopes, making phone calls, going door to door – is today about half what it was in the late 1960's.
- 2) Active membership in local clubs and organizations, like the PTA, has dropped by about half, percentage-wise, since the 1970's.
- 3) People are visiting one another less frequently, having friends over for dinner less frequently, getting together to play cards less frequently.

In short, every objective measure of participation in civic life is declining.

Several causes have been suggested for this decline in community, such as television, suburban sprawl replacing neighborhoods, dual-career families. But that's not our focus at this point. We're not trying to correct society's ills. Instead, I mention these facts to make two points:

First, there are forces in our society which are pulling people apart, isolating them, and making it more difficult for them to come together in community. And we as a church in this society, in America at the beginning of the 21st century, are subject to those same forces. We have to work intentionally at building and maintaining community within the church, or these same forces will separate us and isolate us from one another as well. **We are rowing against the current of our culture; if we do nothing, we will get swept downstream.**

Second, we have an opportunity. **Although the level of connectedness between people in our society has dropped, their need for connectedness has not.** God made us social beings; people are still hungry for fellowship. And as they see our community, our love for one another, our care and concern and support for one another, they will want that for themselves. They will want to be a part of that. And we will have the opportunity to introduce them to Jesus Christ. **Because it is through our connection with Jesus Christ that we are connected to one another. Our common union with Him produces our union with each other.**

Now we're going to be looking at the power of encouragement in strengthening the bonds of love that hold us together.

“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.” – 1 Thessalonians 5:11

From this verse, we see two things: that encouragement and building one another up is not something that just happens naturally; Paul had to instruct them to do it. Also, we see that encouragement is not something unnecessary or unimportant. But why is that? Why is encouragement important? Why is it worth the investment of time and effort?

1. Encouragement is important because it helps us keep the faith.

In case you hadn't noticed, this world is opposed to the gospel. We need encouragement to continue standing firm for Christ in the midst of a world that rejects Him; to keep believing in something that many people consider a myth. This world regards Christians as fools, guiding our lives by a bunch of fairy tales, trying to keep an out-of-date moral code, believing things that the scientists, historians, and philosophers have told them can't possibly be true.

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him.” – 1 Corinthians 1:18, 2:14

"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” – John 15:18-19

How many of you like to be hated? How many like to be regarded as fools [I didn't say how many are fools]? Is that encouraging or discouraging?

The news media, the entertainment industry, and higher education (opinion leaders) are the groups most hostile to faith. They don't just disagree, but show open contempt for Christians.

“I think it makes perfectly good sense that the Kansas Board of Education has deleted any mention of evolution from the state’s science curriculum. A state’s curriculum should reflect the intellectual level of its leaders. If, indeed, those leaders have second thoughts about evolution, it may be that they themselves have not evolved much from whatever crawled around eons ago.” (Alan Lupo, Boston Globe staff writer, 8/22/1999)

Christians are routinely portrayed in the media as fools, as hypocrites, as dangerous intolerant bigots who threaten our democratic way of life. There are exceptions, but generally, when Jesus Christ or the Christian faith is given any attention in the media, those who accept the Bible as true are seen as naïve or ignorant, while the critics of the Biblical accounts who are treated respectfully.

No one likes to be viewed in that way. Nobody enjoys having their beliefs ridiculed and held up to contempt. It’s discouraging. You start to wonder if maybe they’re right and the Bible is wrong. Maybe this is all just a myth, a delusion, a pleasant falsehood. **That’s when we need to come alongside one another and say, “Keep the faith. Don’t give in to doubt. Don’t let the scorn and contempt of the world turn you away from the Truth.”** We need to encourage one another to believe God and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ, in a world that is hostile to both.

We need encouragement because the Christian life is a struggle. Jesus said that His yoke is easy and His burden is light. But He also said that in order to follow Him, we have to deny ourselves and take up our cross every day. In other words, we have to be willing to give up everything, including if necessary our own lives, in order to follow Christ. We have to be willing to suffer and sacrifice. Jesus said that following Him is not something to be entered into lightly; he warned that we must first consider the cost of doing so. And that cost is our life – everything we have, everything we are.

And one of our most difficult struggles is the battle against sin in our own hearts. God’s power is sufficient, but it’s still a struggle. We need renewed strength every day, to follow Christ and not yield to temptation. We need encouragement from one another to keep running, to finish the race and not give up.

“Therefore . . . let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross. . . . Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” – Hebrews 12:1-3

“Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” – Hebrews 3:13

Like the spectators at the Boston Marathon, cheering on the runners, we all need encouragers. We need people to stand and cheer for us – when our legs feel like rubber and our chest is on fire; when we would give almost anything just to be able to stop running the race and quit

The necessity of encouragement is seen in how many times it is mentioned in the New Testament. Over and over, we are told that Paul or Barnabas (whose name meant “encourager”) or another of the apostles is travelling to a church in order to encourage them.

“[Paul and Barnabas] preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.” – Acts 14:21-22

“I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong — that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith.” – Romans 1:11-12

“We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God’s fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, so that no one would be unsettled by these trials.” – 1 Thessalonians 3:2-3.

Was Paul wasting his time on a nonessential activity? After all, he had a tremendous responsibility. He was the apostle to the gentiles. If Paul’s ministry was unfruitful, the future of the Christian church would be in doubt. Paul couldn’t afford to waste time on unimportant matters, on mushy, feel-good trivialities. Yet time and time again, we see him, not teaching or writing chapters of the Bible, but simply encouraging people. Why? Because encouragement is essential to our spiritual health. We need it. We need to receive it from one another.

2. Encouragement is important because it is so powerful.

“I can live for two months on a good compliment.” – Mark Twain

How do we respond when we receive a compliment? We savor it, we turn it over and over in our minds, we repeat it to our spouse [“My boss said I did a good job this morning.”] We play it over and over again in our minds, until it’s burned into our long-term memory. In short, we treat compliments like a starving man treats a filet mignon. Why is that? Because encouragement has such power.

“Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.” – Proverbs 12:18

“The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit.” – Proverbs 18:21

You have this power! If you have a tongue, you hold the power of spiritual life and health. Your speech has the power to revive us, your brothers and sisters in Christ: to renew our strength, to refresh our spirit, to lift us out of depression. That’s what

encouragement can do. **Wouldn't it be a shame to have such awesome power and not use it?**

As we encourage others, we become encouraged ourselves. As we express appreciation, we become thankful. As we encourage someone to trust God, our own faith is strengthened. As we comfort others who are suffering, we ourselves find comfort and joy.

“A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.” – Proverbs 11:25

3. How can we encourage one another?

First, realize that encouragement can come in many forms. Encouraging words, or maybe just an understanding ear and a willingness to just listen. An arm around the shoulder. A gift. A note. An act of service. A word of appreciation. The number of ways in which we can encourage one another are as many and varied as we are as individuals. The main thing is to communicate that you love them and care about them.

Second, be with them. Instead of ministering to them from a position of superiority, encourage them as a fellow disciple, a fellow recipient of God's love and grace. Encourage them as someone who in due time may need encouragement from them. Be willing not only to “rejoice with those who rejoice” but also to “mourn with those who mourn,” as Paul writes in Romans chapter twelve.

And Third, remind them of the truth. Don't pretend that their circumstances are any different or better than they really are [No empty platitudes]. But remind them of the truth about God, and the truth about themselves. Help them gain an eternal perspective on their troubles. Point them to Christ. Remind them that God loves them, that He's in control, and that He hasn't abandoned them. Remind them that God never fails, that He's always faithful. Remind them that He's always good, even when it seems otherwise. And while you're reminding them of all that, you'll find that you will come to believe it yourself.