

On Encouragement

But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. (Heb. 3:13)

I have a secret treasure trove at home. It has nothing to do with financial statements, programs I have done, awards I have garnished, or degrees I have earned. It consists of encouraging notes people have written to me over the years. From time to time, I retreat there and have an "Attaboy session", allowing the Spirit to take the gracious words of God's people and to fortify my soul to continue. These sessions have underlined to me the vital importance of encouragement in the body of Christ. I am sure that the people who wrote those notes to me would be stunned to hear how meaningful, in an enduring sense, they have been. My friends were simply obeying the command of Hebrews 3:13 in a tangible way. My life has been blessed repeatedly by their obedience.

God commands us to be an encouraging people. The ministry that heeds this directive and cultivates such a demeanor is enriched. Let us remind ourselves of a couple of reasons why God gives and reiterates this instruction in the Bible. First, encouragement is a deep and abiding need of the people of God. Life is challenging, and many experience adversity. But even apart from unusually taxing circumstances, the drone, the routine, and the natural entropy of our daily lives can play out in our spirits in a minor key. Discouragement is often the unwelcome companion of God's children. Like a leukemia of the spirit, it saps our energy for Christ, shrivels our Kingdom vision, and causes us to grow introspective, self-protective, and ornery. It implodes on us.

We are jars of clay (2 Cor 4:7) meant to exhibit the treasure God has put within us. However, when discouragement comes, it works a container meltdown that leaves us neglecting that treasure and miring ourselves in our own mud. An encouraging word can be a breath of fresh air to a fellow sojourner; a divine breeze that fills another's sail and gives new determination to continue the pilgrim trek. Giving encouragement also does wonders for the encourager. Resolving to be an encouraging person can help grow us out of ourselves. Encouragement demands that we be observant of others' abilities, needs, and inclinations. It beckons us beyond the narrow confines of our narcissistic tombs and dares us to be biblical: to care for others as we care for ourselves. It invites us to learn to say the appropriate uplifting word; to come alongside with a helping hand at an opportune time; to keep our mouths shut and really listen to another's heartbreak; to be found faithful to a task of which we are profoundly weary; and to scrupulously honor a confidence shared.

Second, encouragement fosters a healthy, growing atmosphere. To be an encouraging person requires that we be secure enough to see what is good in one another and to be for each other. The encouraging spirit values what the Lord has entrusted to the entire community and desires to see that divine investment grow and flourish. The world instructs us to compete. "I'm better than you are" spirit glides just beneath the surface. In this kind of competitive environment, an encouraging word to a potential rival for recognition is dumb. Putting the other down, the world insinuates, somehow makes us bigger. The art to be mastered is the subtle sidebar cut that postures itself as "concern", rather than the gossip or belittling dig that it really is.

Paul chides the Corinthians for this kind of worldly competition in 1 Corinthians 3. The Corinthians were comparing leaders and drawing conclusions that led them down the path of pride, envy, and jealousy. The church was in real danger of dividing along these competitive fissures. What the Corinthians did by falsely pitting their leaders against each other, we can do by allowing our competitive ardor to set ourselves against one another.

Determining to be an encourager reminds me that “my place” is God's doing, and that God's Kingdom work is infinitely bigger than pious, petty politics. It causes me to recall that I am a member of a ministering group of believers and that each of our contributions is important for that organization to serve as intended by our gracious Lord.

In Acts 4:36, we meet for the first time in the Bible a most interesting fellow—Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus. We see Joseph several more times in the New Testament, but never by his birth name. He is otherwise known as Barnabas, meaning "son of encouragement". Barnabas so embodied an encouraging spirit that he became identified with this spiritual characteristic. Would it not be wonderful to be such a fellowship of uplifting encouragement that we too would be known for this salutary trait, both within the believing community and beyond.